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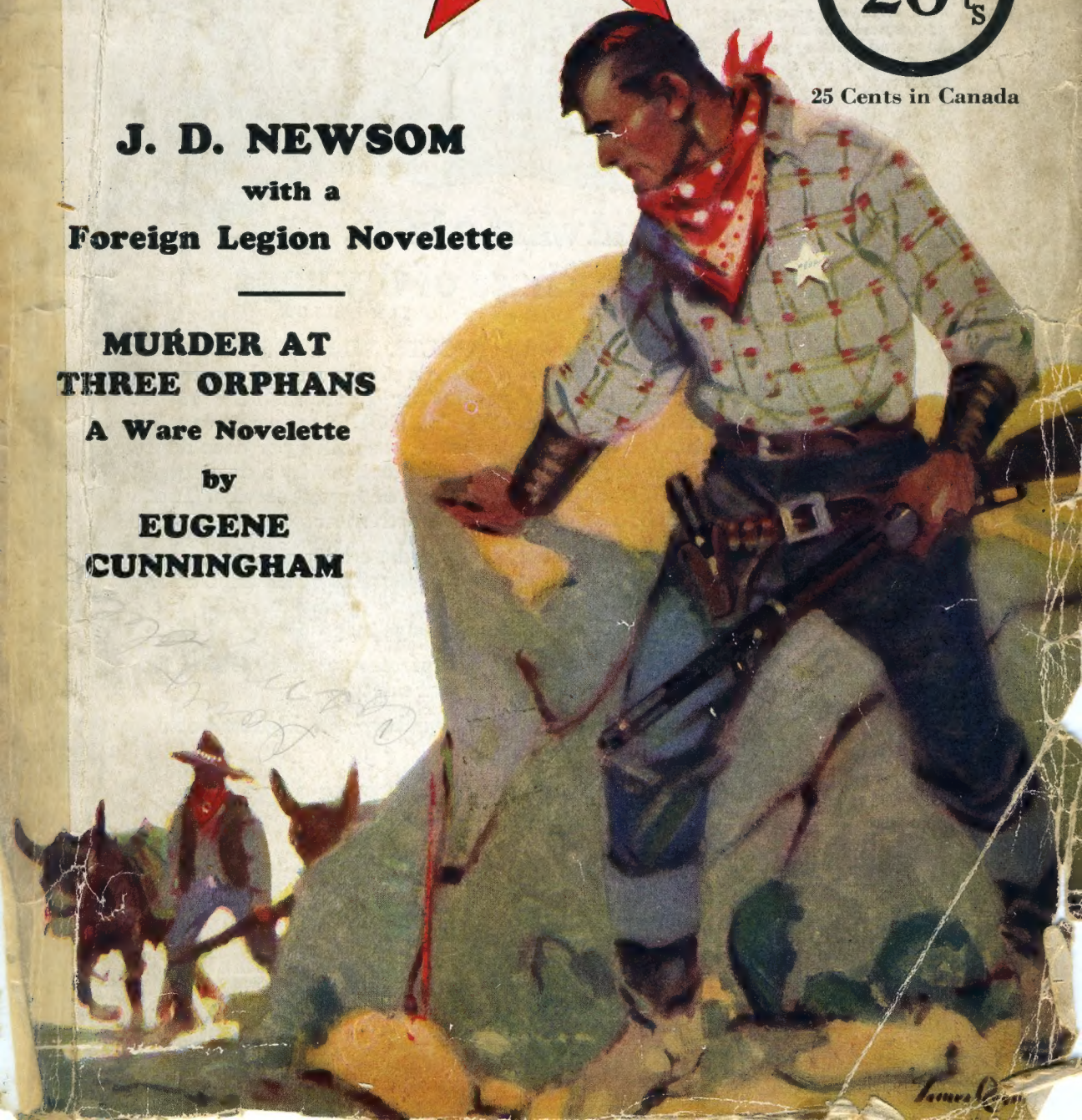

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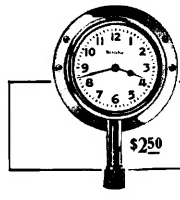

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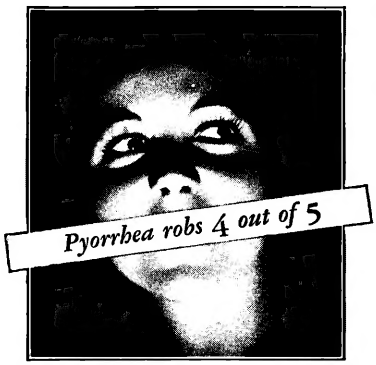

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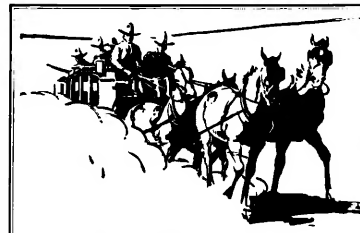

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Vol. VII, No. 6 March, 1928

Frontier Stories

HARRY E. MAULE
Editor

A. H. BITTNER
Associate Editor

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MARCH
1928

Frontier Stories

Vol. VII
No. 6

SQUAD ONE

By ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

Author of "Blood on the Butcherblock," "Down on the Picketwire," etc.

"Rimrock to rimrock the best ranch in Wyoming" was Eagle Nest Basin, Government land open to homesteaders—homesteaders who could oust the outlaw Koonts gang who were using it as a hideout. Squad One, of Uncle Sam's infantry, tried and proved in the hell of the trenches, accepted the challenge—and came with guns unlimbered

CHAPTER I

EIGHT COMRADES

"SAY, fellow," exclaimed Corporal James Goff, as he squatted on the floor of Squad One's bullet-riddled billet and squinted upward through a hole in the roof, "say, fellow, about this Eagle Nest Basin you been ravin' about. Sure you ain't dreamin'? Where I went to school the book said Wyoming was just a sunburned patch of sage-paved hell."

"Yuh quit school too soon, Corp," retorted Cowboy Wooten. "If you'd 'a' stuck with it till the Third Reader you'd 'a' learnt they was mountings in Wyoming. And when I say Eagle Nest Basin is in the mountings, I mean way off in the mountings."

"You claim they's big game in that valley?" asked Bud McCune, a big, awkward Dakota farm lad who was number 4 in Squad One's rear rank. No use to say he was six feet tall, for otherwise he would not have been in Squad One. All civilized infantrymen are sized from the left, as you face them; therefore this particular Squad One, like all others, was composed of the eight tallest men in its Company Front.

"Big Game!" echoed Cowboy Wooten, sometimes known as "Blondy" on account of his being a curly tow-head, and who, because of his ungainly bowed legs, was also, upon occasions of line-up, concealed in the rear rank. "Sure thing they's big

game; bear, deer, elk, panthers, sheep. And the crik holes is plumb lousy with trout."

"Oh, man!" applauded Brick Fleming, the red-haired youth from Iowa, who at the moment was polishing his Expert Rifleman medal on the sole of his shoe. "That's me. If this here war ever gets over I'm goin' out there and——"

"You'd likely go out there and git shotten up by the Koonts gang," predicted Wooten. "They's a doggone good reason why Eagle Nest Basin ain't never been homesteaded. Folks live there already. They jest live there, that's all; they don't own the land. They'd like to own it, but the only way they could own it would be to homestead it, and they ain't eligible to homestead; see?"

"Outlaws?" asked an immaculate private named Stamford. Stamford was a thin lad, with a serious face and a high, intelligent brow. He hailed from Boston and wore horn-rimmed spectacles. Yet in spite of these handicaps he had not only broken into the army but he had learned to look through the peepsight of an Enfield almost as well as Brick Fleming; the zinc bar on his O. D. shirt read "Sharpshooter." Moreover, Stamford was the only man in Company "E" who had never been caught with a loose button at inspection. Thus kitchen police was a sealed book to him and his fellows called him "Cap Tigheman's darling."

"Outlaws!" echoed Cowboy Wooten. "You said it, feller. And they're the reason Eagle Nest Basin is government land today. They can't homestead themselves, but they can John Brown make buzzard fodder outa anyone else what tries. It'd take a whole regiment of marines to homestead that basin."

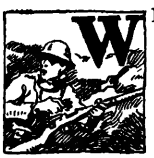
Corporal Goff tossed a clod up through the hole in the billet roof, aiming at a German bomber but missing it some five thousand feet.

"Regiment of marines!" he scoffed. "What about Squad One, of 'E' Company, 314th Infantry?"

Cowboy Wooten grinned cunningly. The fact was that all the while Wooten had been raving about a certain Wyoming basin, he had been nursing a definite scheme. Wooten meant to homestead when, and if, he ever got back home. He had picked the spot, knew the number of the very section he coveted, and he wanted tried and true neighbors on adjoining claims. So he had been baiting Squad One. He knew well the temperament of his comrades and so he rubbed his raw-boned jaw doubtfully.

"Well, I reckon eight men *could* hold that Basin agin Koonts, that is, eight *good* men," he answered Goff. "But I'd sure advise any yeller-bellies to stay home."

As a result of this plant, a hot argument ensued. After a while Retreat sounded, and the eight members of Squad One were unusually thoughtful as they turned out for the call.



"WELL, what chanct do yuh reckon we got of gettin' out of this mess?" asked Brick Fleming three days later. He dodged back into the shell hole and pushed a new clip into his Enfield. Overhead, going and coming, was heard the shriek of shrapnel. A grenade rolled down into the crater, fuse smoking. Goff snatched it, and threw it out; it exploded beyond the lip, the detonation drowning Goff's answer, or all but four words of it: "—as a snowball in——"

War was on five sides of them, and the members of Squad One huddled as deep down toward the sixth side as possible. Finally however Mr. Stamford of Boston crawled up the slope to the lip and emptied a clip to windward. He slid back, then took off his horn-rimmed glasses to wipe away the powder stains. Goff's ear told him that war was only active on four sides of them now. That pesky machine nest off to windward seemed to have quit barking.

"Trouble with us is that we're too far from home," commented Alabama Jones. Squad One had been made up of replacements, and thus it happened that all of its members hailed from different states. Jones, the brunette Southerner, had lost his rifle while tripping over some wire and hence was of no great use as a military unit of the squad.

"You'll git hell from Cap Tigheman fer

losin' that gun," reminded Buck Conroy, the lantern-jawed Texan. "When Tigheman ketches yuh without it, he'll——"

"Aw, shut up," cut in Alabama Jones. "If I ever see Cap Tigheman again him and me'll both have spiked tails and won't need no guns. We ain't got no more chanct of gettin' out of here than——"

"Than a tenderfoot homesteader in Eagle Nest Basin," finished Brick Fleming, resuming a theme which had intrigued him so much lately that it was on his mind even in the hour of doom.

That started them off; while the eight men hovered in the bottom of the shell hole seven of them baited Wooten into giving out more details about Eagle Nest Basin.

"Yep, it's kinda like this place at that," admitted the Wyoming cowboy. "If we was there, we'd be sure to git shotten hell out of, same as here. Difference is if we was there we could hear the birdies sing, while we was gittin' shot up. And there we could each pick a lily and hold it in our mitts. But all joshin' aside, fellers, that basin's a plumb purty piece of country. Spruce slopes comin' down into a open lush bottom, cold water and plenty of it, grass and still more of it, plum thickets on the crik and grapevines, quail in yer back-yard and turkey on the roof. Grouse in the brush, rainbows jumpin' in the crik, and wild honey—say, quit drippin' at the mouth, Conroy—and range fer two thousand cows. But it's all goin' to waste. All glommed by a bunch of shifty crooks what kills all the small posses and runs away from the big ones, but who always come back as soon as the coast is clear. Fifty miles from nowhere, all right, but who'd want to git anywhere if he owned that valley I seen it onct from the east rim, but the Koonts gang seen me and started shootin'. Seemed like that open lush bottom down there about three miles square —that's nine sections. It comes under the Mountain Act, and one man could take up a section. Now if nine men had the guts and could shoot straight enough——"

"Jigger! They're rushin' us," warned Corporal Goff.

His ear had caught, above the din without, the heavy tread of charging infantry.

Squad One immediately manned the lip. From the north, toward them were seen running an entire enemy platoon. Obviously their orders were to clean out the trapped Americans at bayonet point.

Goff and Fleming got into action first, pumping clips at the oncomers at white-of-eye range. Six men fell dead or wounded, and the remainder dropped to shoot at prone. Stamford and McCune sent ten slugs biting along the ground while Goff and Fleming slipped back to reload. Followed volleys from the third file, then from the first, each shot fired with deadly accuracy. The attack was checked; McCune reported the remnant crawling away.

IN THE next two hours of this early November afternoon there were three more such attempts to dislodge Squad One. It was on the east bank of the Meuse River. Liggett's First American Army was astride that river at many points. Yet at this particular spot a crack Prussian Division had resisted the crossing. In the act of crossing, Tigheman's "E" Company, of the 314th Infantry, had almost made it, leaving in the maelstrom of their retreat only one doggedly ambitious squad on the east bank. Squad One.

True, in general it was a German retreat. But that didn't help Squad One any, as at this one crosing the Germans had held the river. Goff's command was trapped.

Yet though the air above them was whistling, as the day wore on the squad suffered but one casualty. That was when Alabama Jones saw a chance to grab a German rifle to replace his own. The German, dead or dying, was ten feet beyond the lip. Jones made a dive, got the rifle, was jerking at the man's belt in order to have proper ammunition, when a bullet drilled him. He retained the rifle as he stagged back to the lip, but when he hit the bottom of the hole he was unconscious. His comrades found life in him, but it appeared to be leaking away through a hole in his chest.

He still had life in him, the tiniest

flicker of it, at sundown. But night brought no relief to his fighting fellows. All through it they hovered at bay, facing doom, isolated beyond reasonable hope of rescue.

Came sunrise and by a miracle, or perhaps because of the tender ministrations of his friends, Hubert Jones of Alabama still retained a feeble grasp on life. The others left him prone on the pit's bottom while they resumed defense of the lip. Rations were gone. There was enough water for Jones, no more; they gave it to him.

They discovered that through the night more machine-guns had been placed around them. Most of these were directing a fire westward across the Meuse at the main body of Americans, but occasionally volleys were poured in hot streams across the lip of Squad One's hole. To peer out was almost certain death. And yet not to peer out was to permit the approach of grenadiers.

Grenades! These were the greatest peril. Three times Goff, and once Stamford, caught them like baseballs and hurled them out. Stamford's throw was short; debris from the grenade almost blinded Bud McCune; thenceforth the pain of opening his eyes was too great—he dropped listlessly beside Alabama Jones.

Six men were left, as the new day began. Death stalked them, tightened about them like a stifling cord; hunger and thirst and pain sapped at their manly strength. Yet even then when a great helmeted head peered over the crater at them —they had been quiet so long the Germans thought them dead—Conroy shot the man cleanly between the eyes. Killing had become a habit with Squad One. The victim proved to be a beefy giant of a soldier; his body pitched forward and he came tumbling down amidst Squad One. They dragged his two hundred pound corpse to the far side of the hole, thankful for its canteen, which contained a pint of water. They gave the water to McCune, and to Alabama Jones.

A few minutes later Stamford collapsed, from sheer exhaustion. Then Hogan. One by one the squad dropped, all but Goff. Goff stood, weary, fagged, hopeless, presenting the muzzle of his Enfield to the smoky sky.

N HOUR passed, and Goff still stood. An hour of torturing suspense, while he waited for another head to peer over the top. But it chanced that none came. He saw that Stamford and Hogan were asleep. Or were they dead? McCune was moaning on his back, rubbing his eyes. Hubert Jones was —but no, decided Goff, Jones wasn't quite dead, for his lips moved. Fleming was pushing with his feet at the German corpse. Goff reached down and heaved— dragging the body another yard from the huddled heap of his friends.

The effort dizzied him. But things were quieter outside, it seemed. Goff decided he would crawl up the slope and peep over the lip. Began to crawl, painfully. Halfway up the slope he encountered a shiny, egg-shaped ball which was rolling down. A grenade! And it was smoking.

Goff grabbed at it, missed it. He turned ashen white as the thing rolled down toward the heap of men in the pit. He saw it; they didn't; their eyes were too far gone to see anything smaller than the spinning universe itself. So too, almost, were Goff's. Yet he did see that smoking egg, that infernal pellet of death, roll into the pit; he saw it strike the back of a prone figure, disappear, wedged into the niche between elbow and ribs.

Then the explosion. Dust, fumes, smoke, flying bits of human flesh. Then the hole was like a tomb, breathless, as breathless as death. It seemed to Goff that even beyond the lip the voice of war was hushed. He pulled at a sharp fragment which stuck like an arrow in his cheek. His own blood bathed him, keeping him conscious. And now, through the ascending smoke, he looked about from man to man of Squad One.

Strangely, he could see no evidence that a single one of them had been blown to pieces. There they lay, much as before. Then Goff's stunned brain registered the fact that it was under the German corpse that the bomb had exploded; it was this which had been mangled, to the salvage of Squad One. The dead had suppressed death. Goff's bloody hand came away from

his cheek, plucking the spike which had pierced him. A fragment, not of metal but of bone! It was the half of a human rib.

Goff hurled it from him. His mind, sickened by a hundred hideous visions, still was conscious of the strange new silence without. Were they creeping to an attack? Why had the guns stopped booming? Or was he, Goff, deaf? That was it —this last crack must have deafened him. Goff rolled over against Stamford and closed his eyes.

As a fact guns were booming but Goff, and Squad One, heard them not. Rockets flared, and bombs burst in air, but not across their own dun vista of drifting smoke. Drums drummed; bugles—every din of war crashed in one mighty discord; but Goff, and Squad One, heard it not. It was all too far away, in Paris, in Orleans, in the foggy firths of Scotland and on the sidewalks of New York. It was reprieve, at this eleventh hour, for the last million of the doomed, life—and glory—for Squad One.

CHAPTER II

A TRYST IN LANDER

EX-CAPTAIN Dick Tigheman, late of "E" Company, 314th Infantry, disembarked from a Chicago and Northwestern train at Lander, Wyoming. He had to get off there because the line goes no farther. Nor can it go farther until its engineers elect to tunnel the Continental Divide.

Tigheman was a man just turned thirty, rather slight of figure and with a distinctive military bearing, the latter accentuated just now because he still wore a uniform. In doing so he had no other motive than economy. What money he had was budgeted for other purposes than wardrobe, and he could see no reason for outfitting in civilians when he was going almost beyond the sight of man anyway, and while he still possessed three stout uniforms of whipcord.

Tigheman's appearance was that of a man born to command. His blue eyes were sharp and fearless. His lips were firm and straight; his jaw was square. His face, naturally ruddy of complexion, was markedly honest. Enlisted men of "E" Company had thought the world and all of Tigheman. "Always out in front," they had bragged of him. True, except on that last day when those gangling skyscrapers of Squad One had run away from them all.

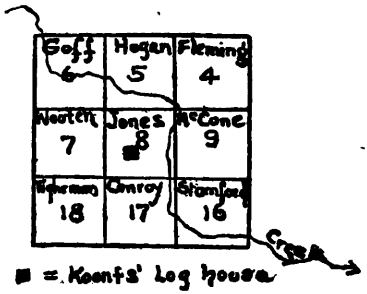
Squad One! Those particular eight men were much on Tigheman's mind just now for he was on his way to join them in a place called Eagle Nest Basin. He didn't have much hope that Hubert Jones would be out of the hospital yet, but he expected to find the rest of the bunch on hand. Tigheman himself had been delayed two months by a detail on the Army of Occupation.

Alighting at the Lander station, he checked over his baggage, which he found was being unloaded on a truck. He noted that all items had arrived in good condition, including a long box containing various parcels of U. S. ordnance. Wooten's prescription had been guns, and to Tigeman's mind the best gun for a man just mustered out of the A. E. F. was the regular Enfield. Ditto for sidearms. So Tigheman had purchased his own ordnance from the Q. M. C. and hoped that Squad One had done the same.

Half an hour later Tigheman was standing before the register of the Wind River Hotel. Wooten had mentioned this hotel; the clerk wondered why Tigheman, before registering himself, thumbed the pages for three months back. But the guest knew what he was doing, and he found exactly what he was looking for. Yes, everybody had passed this way except poor old Alabama Jones. Well, Jones could hardly expect discharge from the hospital until June, and this was but the last week in April. Tigheman noted that Goff, Stamford, McCune, Hogan, Fleming and Conroy had all registered at various dates in March. Wooten, of course, lived in Lander. And Wooten's instructions had been to the effect that there was no use trying to get to the basin before early spring, on account of snow drifts on the pass, although the basin itself was habitable all winter.

After noting the previous registrations, Dick Tigheman registered himself. Then he went up to his room. There, awaiting supper hour, he whiled away the time by perusing two maps in his possession. One was a large one, put out by the government, showing all of Fremont County and adjacent regions, the upper watershed of the Wind Rivers from Washakie Needle to South Pass. On it was traced in pencil a route by which a pack horse outfit might get from Lander to Eagle Nest Basin.

The other map was merely a rude sketch made by Private Wooten in "E" Company's last foreign billet.



The nine squares on the sketch were alleged by Wooten to represent nine square miles of verdant, open lush bottom in the center of the basin. From these nine sections of bottom land, thickly timbered spruce slopes arose to encircling rimrocks. The only way to get in or out of the basin was up or down Mulberry Creek, which, except for the interlude of the basin, was enclosed in a box canyon.

TIGHEMAN had first seen this sketch on the day when, in France, "E" Company had received embarkation orders for home. Jones and McCune were in the hospital; but Corporal Goff and the rest of Squad One had come to the company office and asked if Tigheman and the first sergeant would represent Jones and McCune in the drawing of certain numbers from a hat.

Tigheman had noticed that the numbers were 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 16, and 17. Section 18 was left out because the creek didn't cross it, and they only had eight men anyway, explained Wooten. What creek? the captain and the first sergeant had wanted to know. Whereupon Wooten had explained certain plans of Squad One, presenting a sketch of Eagle Nest Basin.

"But the creek also seems to miss section 7," had suggested Tigheman.

Yes, some sections had the edge on others. One section even had a big log house on it. That was why the captain and the top sergeant, being the most responsible parties available, were being asked to draw for Jones and McCune. The lottery must be eminently fair. Also they wanted everything settled now, because the men might arrive to file their homesteads separately, and each must know the exact number of his section.

Naturally Tigheman had asked for more details, which Wooten gave in full, praising the richness of the basin but not forgetting mention of certain outlaws who had always ruled the place by virtue of six-guns. Tigheman, a natural adventurer, had found himself envious of Squad One. The thing appealed to him intensely. In the end he had drawn for Jones, the top drawing for McCune.

"What d'you suppose those crazy fools want to go hunt trouble for way out in the sticks?" the sergeant had asked, after Wooten's crowd had left the office.

"E" Company's top had once been Captain of bellhops in a NewYork hotel, later winning his sergeantcy by virtue of a long practised military bearing. He was an efficient non-com, but he possessed no instinct toward pioneering. Until this trip to France the hardiest frontier he had known was Eighth Avenue.

Not so Captain Dick Tigheman. A Missourian himself, he had an ancestor who had once taken the Oregon Trail. Tigheman did not look at life through the same glasses as the first sergeant. The minds of men are fed on different foods, estranging certain ideals and enshrining others. And so while the ex-chief bellboy of the McAlpin could detect nothing but the most assinine folly in Squad One's expedition to a Wyoming outlaw nest, Dick Tighe-

man seemed to think it was the most sensible thing he had heard of for a long while. That night he had sat up alone in the company office perusing Squad One's service records.

"The kind who aren't likely to get lost in the woods," he had muttered, as he fingered the eight folders, military biographies of Squad One. "They kept the German army out of that shell-hole, and I guess they'll keep the outlaws out of Eagle Nest Basin."

The next day, a certain irrepressible germ sprouting in his mind, the captain had made an informal call at Squad One's billet.

"At ease—and all that sort of bunk, boys," he had said; Tigheman never had been a stickler for the letter of discipline, least of all in those last days after the armistice. Why quibble about rank? thought Tigheman. Especially now that he had come to claim that lower left hand square on Wooten's sketch, to enlist himself, in a war yet to be fought, in Squad One.

THAT was why, months later, Dick Tigheman found himself in Lander, Wyoming. He was about to file a homestead under the Mountain Grazing Act, which permits a 640 acre entry. Section 18, it was, of a certain township and range, some fifty miles into the mountains beyond Lander.

And so all the boys, except Jones, had already passed through! mused Tigheman. He hoped that all seven had gone over in a bunch and thus were well fortified against trouble with the outlaw, Koonts. Who was Koonts? And how, this late in the twentieth century, had he been able to defy organized law? Thinking that the sheriff's office might give him a tip on this point, Tigheman went downstairs and out into the street. Without difficulty he found the court house. In the sheriff's office, the sheriff himself, a swarthy, lazy-appearing man by the name of Hicks, was on duty alone.

"Yep, I hearn about Earl Wooten's damfool stunt," Hicks drawled, answering Tigheman's question. "Took six tenderfoots over to the basin, and claimed they aimed to stay. They'll stay, all right."

"Fine," exclaimed Tigheman warmly.

"They'll stay there, as I was sayin'," resumed Hicks, sizing his caller up shrewdly; "about three feet under the sod—that's where they'll stay. Lots of folks gone over there, and nobody but a posse ever come back. Louie Koonts and his crowd is plumb bad medicine."

"Where do you come in?" grinned Tigheman. "You spoke of posses going over there—and coming back."

Hicks regarded Tigheman's uniform suspiciously.

"Who are you, fellah?" he asked suddenly. "A Ranger?"

"No," replied Dick. "I'm just a private citizen, friend of Earl Wooten's. You say Wooten's crowd all went over together?"

"Yep, and I reckon they ain't got shotten up much yet because for the last two years the Koonts gang ain't used the basin except for a summer hole-up. They go there in May and stay till November. The reason of that is they found out it was doggone hard to git over the passes in case a bigger posse comes than they can handle. Used to hang out there the year around. We used to make a raid on 'em, ever' two years regular, just before election. But two years ago we hit 'em in midwinter, with sixty volunteer deputies. Almost got 'em. We blocked both canyons, inlet and outlet, and the snow blocked the rimrocks.

But they got away some way. Howsomever it taught 'em a lesson. They saw the basin was a trap in winter. They can laugh at a posse in summer, less'n it's got a thousand men, 'cause they can scatter any direction they want to. They got friends, too, lookouts and spies, who allers give 'em plenty of warning."

"I see," said Tigheman. "And this being only the last week in April you think Wooten's crowd is probably unmolested so far."

"Very likely," agreed Hicks. "But they'll git salivated before long. Koonts has got notices posted all over the basin for homesteaders to keep out. Him and his

bunch'll shore be on the prod when they find the valley's been filed on, and they'll come ashootin'."

"What's to keep Wooten and Company from shooting back?" inquired Tigheman.

"Koonts gen'ally has about thirty men around him," informed Hicks. "All of 'em killers. What chance has yore friends got with them many guns?"

"They stood off more guns than that, not so long ago," answered Tigheman. "But let it pass. What particular kind of gang is this Koonts outfit? What's their line? Trains? Banks? Rustling?" Dick decided that he might as well pump Hicks dry of information.

"Hard to say," replied Hicks. "Koonts really ain't in it with the rest of 'em; he jest boards 'em."

"Boards 'em?" queried Dick. "How's that?"

T'S this way. In old Indian days the Koonts, man and wife, settled in the basin and run a few cows. Koonts aimed to homestead, but they wasn't no competition so he put it off year after year. Finally he got to doin' off color jobs here and there, and the law marked him. That made him ineligible to homestead; leastwise he was afeared to come into the Land Office to file. When other nesters come around to look at the valley he run 'em off.

"Him and his woman—they say she used to sling as mean a gun as him—built a big log house in the middle of the basin. They still live there, except in winter. Purty soon Koonts begun to need help to hold the valley, and he got it by throwin' in with other gangs. First Mike Mitchell took up with him. Mike plays a lone hand, mostly up in Montana; I understand he specializes in hoss stealin'. When the law got too hot fer him he hid out with the Koonts tribe. They boarded him, and in return he'd help them hold the basin. As the posses got bigger, and the homesteaders got more ambitious, Koonts had to expand his outlaw boardin'-house. The Schofields hung up with him, and Dode Birch. All kinds of crooks begun takin' their meals there, tradin' bullets fer bed and grub. First one hard-boiled range boss and then another took up with the Koontses. But they don't mix jobs none. Mike Mitchell still plays a lone hand; so do the Schofields. They's no loot split. Only when outsiders try to horn in is they one gang."

"Funny Koonts would have built that big log house, right on government land," remarked Tigheman. "He'll lose it, some day."

"Yep, whoever homesteads the middle section gits right smart of a ranch-house thrown in. That's one reason Koonts fights so hard—he hates to lose that house. The year he built it he framed a scheme to homestead it legal. Sent his wife, Kate Koonts, over here to file in her own name. Land Office man told Kate she couldn't file, bein' a married woman, onless her husband likewise signed the application. Had to sign in front of a notary, too. Next week old Judge Bagby, notary pub, was kidnapped, notary seal and all, and packed on a mule to the basin. Koonts signed that application with a six-gun in one hand and a pen in the other. But when it come to the Land Office they threw it out. The registrar claimed it wasn't legal to stick up a notary pub that way. Then Koonts imported a no-account nephew of his wife's. But first he wasn't twenty-one, and by the time he was he was wanted fer killin' a sheepherder. So not one acre of that basin has ever been filed, till Wooten towed in his six tenderfoot friends last month."

"They tell me the basin's a right pretty piece of country," suggested Tigheman.

"Rimrock to rimrock, it's the best ranch in Wyoming," agreed Hicks. "Grass, trees, water, game—it can't be beat."

"'Where every prospect pleases, and only man in vile'," quoted Tigheman.

"What's that?"

"I said the prospects of making that basin into an A-one twenty thousand acre cattle ranch would be pretty good, if it wasn't for the Koonts crowd," explained Tigheman.

"You said a jawful," agreed the sheriff, as Tigheman left his office.

CHAPTER III

A PROXY

DICK strolled to the post office; Wooten had promised to leave final instruction there for him, care of General Delivery.

Sure enough there was a letter. Wooten informed that he and six of the boys had made their filings, and had seen nothing of Koonts. The letter listed various supplies which Tigheman might do well to bring along, and in conclusion stated:

The boys are worried about Alabama Jones; afraid he won't get here quick enough. His is the center section, you know, the one the big log house is on, and that would leave a bad hole in us if Jones doesn't show up. Look for Koonts in May. If he sees the center section is not filed on, he'll get a dummy somewhere and dab down on it himself. Hogan's a lawyer—anyway he once went to law school—and he wired Jones at his hospital to dig up some one he can trust, some brother, cousin or someone in his family, to come out and file section 8. When Jones gets sound this proxy can relinquish in favor of Jones, says Hogan. But no answer has come from that wire, and we're afraid Jones has lost interest. So I tell you what, Cap; you better file on section 8 yourself; that sews up the middle, and we can let your corner section go.

Wooten.

"Jiminy!" muttered Tigheman to himself. "That would give me, the man who horned in on the deal uninvited, a title to the only improved section in the basin. I'd automatically become legal owner to the Koonts outlaw boarding-house. A nice start for me, but hardly fair to Squad One. Wooten or Hogan should have filed on 8, by the same logic, but I guess they were afraid it would look like doublecrossing Jones."

Well Dick recalled that sacred rite, over in the Alsace billet, of drawing the numbers from the hat. Tigheman had represented Jones, pulling the luckiest number for the wounded absentee. Everyone had agreed Jones deserved it. Squad One had pledged itself to file the border sections, saving the heart for Jones.

Recalling this, Dick Tigheman didn't like the idea of jumping section 8 himself, even though it seemed to be for the greatest good of the greatest number. He was mulling the thing over in his mind as he returned to the Wind River Hotel.

Another train had just arrived on the C. and N. W., and the station bus was parked in front of the hostelry. Tigheman was just in time to see a feminine traveller alight from the bus, enter the hotel a little uncertainly, and then approach the desk to register. Dick did not get a good look at her because just then a buxom waitress announced supper from the dining room door and Tigheman went in to eat.

Half an hour later he saw the latest guest again. In fact, as he was leaving the dining-room he came face to face with her as she entered. Tigheman held the door open for her, a service which the girl acknowledged with a timidly murmured, "Thank you, sir," and a shy smile. Looking after her as she passed to a table, Tigheman decided that she was very young and very pretty. From the way she pronounced "sir," and other details, he guessed her to be a Southerner. Her hair was jet black and coiled quaintly on the back of her head. Tigheman had no doubt but that she was a stranger in Lander, for the buxom waitress eyed her curiously, calling her "Miss" rather stiltedly, and was obviously so fascinated by the extremely modish and semi-formal dinner costume which the patron wore that she, the waitress, toppled the butter saucer off of the water glass on which she had previously balanced it.

Tigheman himself was so interested, although he did not realize it at the time, that he took a seat on a lobby lounge from where he could see the girl's profile through the screen. He saw now that she was quite small, perhaps a half head shorter than himself, although Tigheman was a bare five feet eight. Her face and manners displayed reserve and breeding.

She was black-eyed and long-lashed, a brunette in every perfect detail, with exquisitely molded features and the poise of a princess.

Absorbed in what he supposed to be an entirely unobserved appraisal of her, Dick Tigheman was jerked back to earth by hearing a snickering voice at his elbow.

"Some chicken in there, eh, bo? Yeh, she takes my eye too."

His face flushing a dark red, Tigheman turned to a man who had taken a seat beside him on the lounge. The speaker proved to be a stumpy bald-head of lumpy complexion, a fellow of middle age, coarse featured and wearing an extremely loud suit. It was hard to make him out, for although he wore the half boots of a stockman, he insulted these with the brown derby hat which was perched on the back of his bald head. He was staring insolently through the screen at the Southern girl. What particularly angered Tigheman was that he had been caught in the same stance himself—at least the other man seemed to take it so.

"A classy frail, if yours truly ever lamped one," went on the owner of half boots and brown derby, leering into the dining-room and then turning to wink at Tigheman. "Never seen her in these parts before. D'yuh reckon she's travellin' alone, bo?"

Tigheman restrained a desire to take a stiff poke at the man.

"I'm sure I don't know," was all he said.

Then he picked up an old Cheyenne paper and pretended to read.

OUT of the corner of his eye he saw the stumpy man get up, stroll over to the register, scan it, gossip with the clerk a moment. Then Dick saw him take another oily peep into the dining-room, after which he remarked to the clerk: "Well, I guess I'll go put on the feed bag, before Corry slams the door in my face."

The man hung his brown derby on a nail and started for the dining-room. Tigheman could not doubt the intent writ plainly on his coarse features; obviously he was going to enforce a fresh acquaintance with the diminutive Southern girl. Dick half arose, fists clenched, hating to start a row but seeing no other way out of it, when an interruption came from an unexpected quarter. The masher was half way through the dining-room door when a tall angular woman with a shrewish set of unfavored features entered the lobby from the street.

"Henry, Henry; you Henry; where you goin'?" she called sharply.

All the swagger immediately disappeared from Henry; he drew back into the lobby, cringing like a dog just caught killing sheep. Tigheman was quite sure that the shrewish woman was his wife.

"Oh, I was jest goin' in to supper, Mayme," answered Henry, humbly.

"Goin' in to eat, eh? Without waitin' fer me? Well, the nerve of yuh! But here I be and we'll go in now."

Henry and his watchful wife entered the dining-room. They seated themselves at the Southern girl's table, for that was the only one equipped with service. Tigheman noted that the clerk, a pasty faced youth in his teens, was laughing heartily over behind the registry desk. Dick strolled over. "What's the joke?" he asked. "Let me laugh too."

The boy jerked a thumb toward the dining-room. "I was laughin' at that Hank Suggs," he explained mirthfully. "He's sure got a eye for a keen skirt but his wife won't give him any chance."

"Town folks?" asked Tigheman.

"No, they live west of here in the hills. Her first husband was a ranchman named Munson. He got shot by an outlaw named Koonts. Then she—" the clerk thumbed toward the dining-room again—"bein' a widow, turned the ranch-house into a store and with that and cream and egg sales she's made a living. Along came Hank Suggs, then a cheap drummer making the stores so far out in the sticks no A-one drummer would hunt 'em up, to hook the widow for a bill of goods and she hooked him. Married him. Since then she's spent half her time supportin' him, and the rest of her time keepin' him away from other women. He's a no-good hombre, but harmless, they say. But her—

Mayme's a green-eyed wildcat with double action claws. One time Henry was in town and he took our waitress, Corry, to the pitcher show. No harm meant, y'understand, but Mayme got suspicious and followed him to town. She stuck up the Palace Theatre, stopped the show, and dragged Henry out, beating him over the head with a Smith and Wesson .38."

Somewhat amused, Tigheman strolled back to his seat on the lounge. Looking through the screen he could see that Mrs. Suggs, whose presence and vigilance Tigheman thoroughly applauded, was conversing loquaciously with the little Southern girl. Henry was having nothing to say, but was keeping nervously meek, his eyes on his plate.

All danger of a squall in this quarter over, Tigheman arose and strolled out into Lander's dusk. Across the street at the Palace Theater he could see the red-lighted announcement of a Wm. S. Hart picture. Feeling in need of the proper educational atmosphere, he went over and took the show in.

IT WAS considerably after nine o'clock when he returned to the hotel, where he found the premises as quiet as a morgue. Tigheman went up to his room, but for some reason did not feel like going to sleep. So he took off the high-collared and never too comfortable blouse of his uniform, rolled up his shirt sleeves and then, passing up to the front end of the corridor, he went out upon the hotel's upstairs veranda for a smoke.

It was pleasant out there; no one to intrude upon his thoughts and a nice high railing to support his feet. He lolled back in an extremely rickety rocker and contemplated the nocturnal beauties of Wyoming. The porch faced north, and Tigheman could see the moonlit sheen of the Shoshones stretching away into the night as far as eye could reach. Stabbing upward into the moon itself, the Washakie Needle was like a sharp cathedral spire. Mountains of every curve and color, yellow, purple, white—bulged and peaked; a lofty, luminous playground for the stars, they were; and lovely, as lovely as a maiden's dream.

The spell of them laid a caressing hand upon Tigheman's heart. He was glad he was on his way to join Squad One. He had a glowing premonition that they were going to get their money's worth, out there in that empire of snow and spruce.

It was while he was thinking these pleasingly dreamful thoughts, that a sound behind him caused his feet to descend from the railing with a pop.

"Excuse me, sir; are you Captain Tigheman?" He heard a voice, inimitably sweet, addressing him.

The man was on his feet in an instant, facing around, and staring at the girl. She was the little Southern girl, the girl who had arrived in Lander on the next train after his own. There she was, amazingly appealing in the moonlight. Who was she? wondered Tigheman. And how did she know his name? She seemed to him now even more tiny, more fairylike, than when he had seen her earlier in the evening.

"I'm Dick Tigheman," he answered; then he noticed that she looked just a little like a gypsy, this girl—she was so dark.

Oddly he found himself wondering if he had missed seeing that high red comb, a wide Spanish comb, in her hair, at supper time, or if it had been there all the while.

"I saw your name on the register," she explained, smiling at Tigheman. She slurred her Rs just a trifle, he noticed. "We got Mr. Hogan's telegram."

"What telegram?" asked Tigheman, gaping, he was sure, like a stable hand at a house guest.

Then in the back of his mind he recalled something in Wooten's note about Hogan having sent Alabama Jones a wire at his hospital.

"Mr. Hogan's," the girl repeated. "My brother can't come before September. I'm Caroline Jones."

She was extending her hand, which Tigheman took and began pumping up and down.

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Jones," he said, and then could have kicked himself for the banality. For only after he had

said it did the fact register in his befuddled brain that this girl was the sister of Private Jones of Squad One.

FIVE minutes later however he had recovered his aplomb. He was seated on the railing, having presented the rickety rocker to Caroline Jones; his pipe was relit, and he was possessed with the motive of her trip to Lander.

"I thought it would be so very simple," the girl explained, widening her big black eyes with a commanding eloquence in a manner which thrilled Tigheman almost as much as the way she had of pronouncing the adverb "very"; to her it was only one syllable. "I was planning to return home tomorrow."

"And now something has occurred to detain you?" asked Dick. "Fine. That is —er—it seems like that would be a mighty short stay for such a long trip, Miss Jones."

"I have been inquiring around," went on the girl, deftly rearranging the Spanish comb in her jet hair, "and I find these homestead laws are very rigid, Captain Tigheman."

"In what respect?" Dick wanted to know.

"You have to see the fa'm befo' you can file on it," explained the girl, in a tone which inferred that she considered the Government had taken an extremely unfair advantage of her. "And now I'll have to go clear over to Eagle Nest Basin to see Hubert's fa'm, befo' I can file on it."

"I see," assented Tigheman. "You got Hogan's wire, which suggested that your brother Hubert send a proxy, preferably a kinsman, to file on section 8 during his detention, and who could later relinquish in Hubert's favor. You, his sister, came, thinking you need go no further than the Lander Land Office. The law gives the filer six months grace after filing before taking up residence. Thus you would never have to go to the land at all, for before six months were expired your brother would be on the job, you having relinquished to him. Now it develops that the technicality which insists that no filing is legal unless the applicant swears under oath that he or she has seen the homestead in question necessitates a trip on your part to Eagle Nest Basin."

"Yes, that is the way it is," agreed the girl.

Tigheman's brow puckered, and he began scratching his jaw. "I don't like it, Miss Jones," he announced. "There's supposed to be some tough characters hanging around that basin. No place for you. I don't really believe it would be wise for you to make a trip out there. Fifty miles, you know; and only a pack trail the last twenty-five."

"Oh, I've heard there are some outlaws out there, Captain Tigheman," acknowledged Caroline; "but I assure you that I am not in the least afraid of them. We have outlaws in Alabama, too, but I have never heard of one of them ha'ming a lady. I was thinking I might go out there, Captain Tigheman, take one look at the place and come right back."

Her placid assurance of the chivalry of all men, whether outlaws or not, caused Tigheman to smile. But he shook his head.

"It's a hard two-day ride each way, Miss Jones," he reminded. "A pretty tough trip, don't you think? You'd want to rest there a day, and five days in the mountains might involve considerable risk for you. You see it's getting along about the time when the Koonts gang are due back at the basin."

"Oh, but I have a plan which makes it really quite safe," insisted Caroline Jones. "In the dining-room this evening I made the acquaintance of a Mr. and Mrs. Suggs. They have a ranch twenty-five miles from here, halfway to Eagle Nest Basin. Mrs. Suggs said I can ride out to her place tomorrow with them, in their buckboard, and stay all night or as long as I like. From there I could make a quick ride to the basin and back, don't you think so, Captain Tigheman?"

"I'm starting for the basin myself tomorrow, Miss Jones," Dick answered, after debating mentally with himself a moment. "And going to buy a saddler and two pack horses and get an early start.

With your permission I'll appoint myself your escort, riding at the wheel of the Suggs' rig as far as their place, camping nearby, and then making a quick round trip to the basin with you when you're rested. You understand I'm in exactly the same predicament as you, Miss Jones. I also have to see my homestead before I can legally file. So inasmuch as you're determined to file your brother's section, I'll just throw in with you. We'll make a flying trip of it and return to Lander. After I've put you on a train for home I'll rejoin Squad One."

IT OCCURRED to Tigheman that Mr. and Mrs. Henry Suggs, in spite of their many obvious frailties of character, would be eminently safe and convenient allies for the present emergency. He recalled a bit of information passed out by the hotel clerk—that Louie Koonts had killed the first husband of the present Mrs. Suggs. In which case the woman must be a bitter enemy of the outlaw and his confederates, which was really the only vital point that needed consideration.

Yet there was a good deal that Tigheman didn't know.

He didn't know that even as he conversed with Caroline Jones there in the moonlight on the second floor veranda, a pitched battle was being waged fifty miles away in Eagle Nest Basin. He did not know that Louie Koonts, however guilty he may have been of other crimes, was innocent of one particular homicide popularly accorded him. He did not know that Mayme Suggs, once Mayme Munson, and in her single state Mayme Kincaid, had been a sister of Katie Kincaid, latterly Mrs. Louie Koonts. Tigheman didn't know that it was Mayme Munson, described by the hotel clerk as a green-eyed wildcat with double action claws, who had shot Al Munson through the heart with that same Smith and Wesson .38 with which she had later chastised Munson's ill-advised successor for alleged infidelity in the Palace Theater. And, too, Tigheman did not know the motive which had prompted Louie Koonts to acknowledge a killing of which he was innocent.

Truth was that it had been vital to Koonts that the Munson ranch, his halfway house, his gateway of supply and warning, be kept at peace with the law. So, having varied crimes already charged against him, he had cheerfully assumed another—a thing which not only saved Mayme Munson but which efficiently furthered her usefulness. It had made the world presume she must be a natural enemy of Koonts. Later she had married the drummer, Suggs, supporting his indolence in exchange for the privilege of tormenting him.

Had Dick Tigheman guessed the full moral and biographical pedigree of Mayme Suggs, he would never in the world have consented to the plan of Caroline Jones. Least of all would he have consented to it, or even discussed it with her, had he known which particular overnight guests of the Wind River Hotel now occupied its north second floor. Within six feet of the rickety rocker in which Caroline Jones was esconced, out there on the upstairs veranda, was a window, a darkened window giving into the north second floor front bedroom. This room was Number 28, and was set down upon the register at the clerk's desk opposite the names of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Suggs. Suggs was asleep, but not so his eternally vigilant wife. Her capacious and capable ears took in every word of the dialogue without.

Actually this dialogue only conveyed to Mayme one fact which she didn't know already. Shoshone Charlie was on his way, riding swiftly through the night with a message to Koonts. Every vital fact concerning Caroline Jones was listed on that message, save one. Mrs. Suggs considered the advisability of sending a second messenger, to advise Koonts that Miss Jones would be escorted by a soldier named Tigheman.

At last however she went to sleep, dismissing the matter as of small consequence. The trap would simply close on two instead of one. She could see no reason to take alarm because Tigheman had elected himself a personal bodyguard for Caroline Jones.

CHAPTER IV

AT THE SUGGS' RANCH

LATE the following afternoon, after a twenty-five mile journey, the buckboard containing Mr. and Mrs. Henry Suggs and Caroline Jones, closely followed by Tigheman herding ahead of him two laden pack mares, arrived at the Suggs' ranch. This layout proved to be at the head of Munson Gulch, well upward into the Shoshones, and the combination house and store seemed to be commodious enough to accommodate every one.

Mayme Suggs, having been introduced to Tigheman by Caroline, appeared friendly enough. But the more Dick saw of her the less he found himself possessed in her favor. After riding at the wheel of her buckboard all day Tigheman decided that the clerk's description was accurate—Mayme Suggs was a green-eyed wildcat with double action claws. It was evident from the way she lashed at her ponies on up-hill pulls and from her viciously snappish manner with her ex-drummer husband, Henry Suggs. Tigheman wondered why the man endured her.

On the other hand Dick found the companionship of Caroline Jones more delightful all the while. Today she wore a wide-brimmed soft felt hat with the brims tied under her chin against the mountain winds, laced boots and a gaberdine riding suit which made her look like a boy.

Arriving at her domicile, Mrs. Suggs would not hear of Tigheman's original scheme of camping out nearby, but insisted that he occupy one of her own spare rooms. Not averse to sleeping in a bed, Dick accepted. Yet although he accepted her accommodation, he insisted on paying for it. Due to the growing dislike he felt for Mayme Suggs, as well as for her mush-brained husband, he resolved not to place himself under obligations to either of them.

Caroline was considerably weary from her long drive. Dick advised her to retire immediately after supper, which she did. After she had gone to her room, Tigheman made arrangements with the Suggses to rent a saddle horse for tomorrow, so that the Alabama girl could accompany him on a quick trip to the basin.

After that Tigheman retired himself to the room assigned him. He removed his outer clothing, and placed his two army automatics on a chair within reach of his bed. As he had entered the wilderness that day at the wheel of the Suggs vehicle, he had looked well to the loading of those pistols; they were the only weapons which he had immediately available, his Enfield rifle being secluded in one of the pack rolls. His responsibility for the safety of Caroline Jones weighed heavily upon him, and he was zealously resolved to see that she made the round trip to and from the basin without mishap.

Now, sitting on the edge of his bed, he looked again to the loaded clips in the Colt's automatics. Then, drawing the chair a little nearer, he lay down and was soon fast asleep.

THUS he did not hear a rider who approached the Suggs gate while the night was still young. Mayme Suggs heard him, in fact had been sitting up awaiting him. Going out to the gate she greeted the derelict Indian, Shoshone Charlie.

Charlie was a disreputable, hatchet-faced aborigine with but one eye. A knife scar angling downward across the sunken socket of the other indicated the manner of its despoliation. He wore a ragged five gallon hat, from whose rear brim dangled two long jet black braids of hair. His body was encased in a suit of greasy unionalls, which looked like they might once have been discarded by some garage mechanic. His left pant leg hung over his boot while the right was tucked within the leather, thus providing a scabbard for a long knife. Nevertheless the Indian carried across his saddle a Winchester repeating rifle of the latest model.

"What did Louie have to say?" Mayme Suggs asked him.

The Indian's face remained impassive,

but from the pocket of his greasy union-alls he fished a note. The moon was sufficiently bright, and Mrs. Suggs read the missive as she stood there by the gate.

Mayme:

Discourage the girl from coming on if you can. Big fight on here and them homesteaders been shooting hell out of us with army rifles. We'll clean them out, in time, but it won't help any to have the girl horn in and maybe get hurt.

This country don't lose much sleep over scraps between squatters, like me, and nesters, like these fellows troubling us now. You can laugh off a whole lot of man killings, but Wyoming is awful touchy about womenfolks. If the girl got hurt the basin wouldn't ever be big enough to hold us again.

So discourage her, if you can, without raising any suspicions that it's hailing hot lead in the basin. If she insists on coming, then let Shoshone Charlie act as her guide, leading her astray to Four Pines Lookout.

L. K.

Reading this, Mayme found herself confronted with a problem. Her own warning to Koonts had failed to make any mention of Tigheman, for at the time of her sending it she had known nothing of Tigheman herself. With Tigheman as an escort, there was now not a particle of doubt but what the girl would insist on going to the basin. Mayme dared not tell them the facts, for she dared not admit she was in communication with Koonts. Anything she said would merely implicate her, and Koonts himself always insisted that she keep herself solid with the law.

How, then, to handle the situation? Koonts suggested that if there was no way to stop the girl from going on, she was to be given Shoshone as a guide, and the Indian could lead her astray to a certain camp on the rimrock. Why not Tigheman, also? thought Mayme. He too was a tenderfoot, so she considered him, and so why not let the Indian lead them both astray? Once at Four Pines Lookout, their fate would be up to Koonts.

Yes, the best thing to do, decided Mrs. Suggs, would be to let both Tigheman and the girl go on, guided by Shoshone. Shoshone could profess to have been sent to the Suggs store by Tigheman's homesteader friends. She, Mayme, could provide the Indian with a bag of groceries to lend the motive color. As he would be returning to the basin anyway, it would be only natural for the two strangers to accept the Indian's guidance. Charlie, choosing his own trail, could take the man and girl into Koonts' Four Pines camp. Whatever happened, such a program would leave the Suggs ranch high and dry above suspicion.

There by the gate Mayme Suggs conferred a few minutes in whispers with Shoshone, then sent him to the barn to sleep.

Left alone, however, she began to worry about the maneuver. She dared not do anything which might displease Louie Koonts. Koonts for years had held a threat over her: he was the one man in all the world she feared. She had thought to please him by informing him about Caroline Jones, but now it appeared that Koonts was more discreet than she had thought; he seemed to have a theory that an outlaw nest was doomed once it began to mishandle womenfolks.

MAYME went upstairs to her room, still worried. Her room chanced to adjoin that of Tigheman. As she was passing Tigheman's door she paused. It occurred to her that the simplest way out of it was to go in and knock Tigheman over the head. The trouble with that was that the next morning Caroline Jones would want to know where he was. Immediately she would become suspicious and of course turn back to Lander, raising a great hue and cry which would probably recruit a posse to embarrass Koonts. No, she couldn't knock Tigheman over the head, Mayme conceded. But she might draw his claws, some way.

For what if Tigheman got suspicious and tied into Shoshone Charlie on the morrow? It was quite possible that the

army officer, equipped with two automatics, might be more than a match for the Indian. In case of a fight between Tigheman and Charlie, Mayme must, to protect the interests of Koonts, fix it so the Indian must win. A simple way occurred to her, and she softly opened the door of Tigheman's room.

There he lay, breathing easily in the sleep of healthful youth. Over the foot of the bed was hung his outer clothing. On a chair, within reach of his hand, lay the two army automatics. Mayme Suggs resolved to remove the clips from those two guns. Having already seen to their loadings the man would probably not look again until too late. Then, in case of a disagreement on the trail tomorrow, he would be impotent to oppose Shoshone Charlie.

It took but a few moments for Mayme to accomplish her purpose. Like a thief in the night she crept up to her sleeping guest, to the chair where lay the man's weapons of defense. The woman knew automatics. In her store she kept their clips and cartridges because sometimes a forest ranger would drop in to replenish his supply. Thus she was familiar with the peculiar manner in which the clips are concealed in the gun butt.

One by one she opened the two magazines, stripped each of its seven cartridges, returned the empty clips, closed the magazines and replaced the guns on the chair. Then she softly tiptoed from the room.

Before retiring she read the note from Koonts again. From its text it seemed that Koonts was having a good deal of trouble with the obstinate homesteaders. Mayme hoped he would soon clean them out, for her store, run primarily as a blind base for the Basin gang, was profitable only insofar as it enjoyed the patronage of Koonts. Money came easily to those fellows, and was spent liberally. Now the woman continued to worry lest her decision to allow Tigheman to go on with Shoshone might cause the outlaw chief trouble. Mayme lived in eternal fear of Koonts.

Once, some years ago, she had failed to warn him that time when the big posse almost caught the gang in the snow trap. Since then Koonts had never dared to spend the midwinter months in the basin. As a punishment for having failed in the warning, Koonts had come around later and beat her, Mayme Koonts. With his huge fists he had struck her, like the brute he was, and Mayme had not dreamed of striking back. But just then Munson, her own henpecked husband had come in, seen her plight, and grinned. That grin had set Mayme berserk and doomed Munson. Snatching Munson's own .38 from his belt, she had shot him through the heart. Then it had been Koonts' turn to grin. It had put Mayme forever in his power and he had made a trade with her on the spot. Let it be said that he, Koonts, had killed Munson. In return for which Mayme was to act forever as a vigilant outpost of the basin's.

Thus Mayme feared Koonts, and hoped she would not displease him in her handling of Tigheman. As for the girl—well, let the doll-faced chit take her chances, thought Mrs. Suggs. She had not failed to note certain covertly admiring ogglings which her husband, Hank, had directed more than once that day toward Caroline Jones.

CHAPTER V

LED ASTRAY

"MISS Caroline," called out Dick Tigheman toward noon the next day—he had dropped the Jones end of her name by now—"can you feel the altitude? We must have climbed a mile since leaving the Suggs place."

"Oh, I love it," answered the girl. "No, it doesn't bother me at all. But will we ever come to the top of this mountain?"

"My map says it's only thirteen miles from the head of Munson Gulch, so we ought to be there pretty soon," answered Dick. "Glad you don't feel dizzy. Neither do I. But I can see why those basin outlaws never have been bothered much by posses."

"But isn't it lucky we have this Indian to guide us?" exclaimed Caroline, turning in her saddle to flash a pearly-toothed smile upon Tigheman.

"Oh, I don't know," responded Dick.

"I have a map of this trail, and you know we learned to read maps in the army. How about a sandwich? Want one?" He took a sandwich from a bag on his saddle and passed it forward to the girl.

As they rode along they consumed a light lunch, although they were too high above canyon beds for water. For that matter there was plenty of snow on either side of the trail, and this could have been melted in an emergency. And Tigheman's map told him they would soon top a divide, and then drop swiftly into the boxed gorge of Mulberry Creek.

Snow became deeper on the trail. At times drifts almost blocked their way. The last mile before attaining the divide was knee deep. Here the pack horses had to be led.

In time they came to the pass, a bald timberless gap only slightly lower than peaks on either side. Shoshone Charlie led the descent beyond. Another hour and they were out of snow, except for infrequent patches which gave them no trouble.

Timber, mostly fir at this belt, thickened as they descended. Thus they could not see great distances ahead. All sorts of wild life flushed at their approach. Twice Caroline saw deer, and once a pair of wild turkeys.

Tigheman reflected that it was out of season for all such game. He was hoping that he might flush something on which he might try out his marksmanship. He wondered if he were still pretty good with a Colt's automatic.

A snowshoe rabbit offered the first opportunity. The big, clumsy animal lumbered off to the left of the trail and Dick whipped out a gun. But he was too late; the rabbit was swallowed by brush before he could shoot.

Tigheman hefted the weapon a minute while he looked closely into the timber on the chance of another shot at the game. He was slightly vexed at his own slowness. Also he was vaguely conscious that his pistol did not feel entirely natural in his grip. He had used that gun a great many times on the target range and on the fields of France, and yet now, strangely, its heft seemed awkward to him. He returned the weapon to its holster and rode on, his own horse the last of five in tandem.

Finally he could hear water far below him. The trail dipped to the right down over a cliff, made a hairpin turn and descended along a sidewall niche of a canyon precipice. Tigheman was sure that this must be the boxed gorge of the Mulberry, a stream which, lower down on its course, fed Eagle Nest Basin. Once in it, a blind man could find Squad One. All he would need to do would be to follow the creek home.

WHEN they arrived in the canyon bed, Mulberry Creek proved to be but a small stream, fordable at any point. Down its riffles the five horse cavalcade followed, still in tandem. Consulting his map again Tigheman figured that it couldn't be more than eight miles to the basin. His heart warmed at the prospect of seeing Goff, Stamford, Hogan and the boys of Squad One. Of course the first thing to do, the very next day, would be to make this trip all over again. He would have to get Caroline Jones back to Lander.

Then, once she had filed her claim and he his, he would put her on a train and probably never see her again. This prospect was not so good. He put in the next half mile wondering whether or not there might be any chance of persuading Hubert Jones, once he was well and sound, to bring Caroline back to Wyoming.

Tigheman's thoughts were so engaged when the five horse cavalcade reached the mouth of a tributary gorge, or ravine, which came in from the left. Here Shoshone Charlie halted. Facing about, he extended his arm, pointing up this feeder canyon, obviously indicating that here the party was to leave Mulberry Creek and turn to the left.

Tigheman opened his lips to give forth an exclamation of surprise; then, catching a certain furtive guile in the one black beady eye of the Indian, he restrained his speech. He became suddenly suspicious of this guide. Was he really a guide? Would Goff, Wooten and the others have picked

up this disreputable renegade, so soon after their occupancy of the basin, and sent him to the Suggs store for supplies? If Shoshone was all right, what was he doing off his reservation, anyway? But most important of all, why should the party leave Mulberry Creek, whose waters fed the basin, and take off up-hill again into a steep dry ravine?

"Thees way," grunted Shoshone Charlie, facing Tigheman impassively, his long arm pointing rigidly to the left.

"Why not keep on down the creek?" asked Tigheman. "This main canyon opens into the basin, doesn't it?" He was careful however to keep all suggestion of suspicion from his voice.

"Thees way queekest," insisted the Indian. "Cholly know trails plenty good. Heep beeg rock slide down canyon—no can pass. Thees way," he continued to gesture to the left. "Bimeby climb over hill and down into creek again."

Tigheman's suspicions subsided in part. He conceded that after all an Indian's knowledge of the mountains should be more dependable than any map.

"All right," he agreed. "Lead the way." Dick reflected that as long as the Indian was in front the fellow could hardly give them any trouble.

Without more words Shoshone turned up the dry ravine. Tigheman caused the pack mares to follow the Indian. Caroline Jones started to take position behind the pack animals but Tigheman whispered to her: "You follow me. Shoshone may be all right, but I'd just as soon ride between you and him from now on."

The girl's eyes widened and she was on the point of asking some question when Tigheman checked her by putting a finger over his lips. Then he guided his own horse to fourth place in line, allowing Caroline Jones to bring up the rear.

In this manner they began the ascent of the ravine, which was extremely narrow and brushy. Tigheman hadn't gone five hundred yards before his suspicions began to trouble him again. Suppose there was a rock slide down the main canyon! Wouldn't it be easier to surmount a rock slide than to climb over an entire mountain? Of course the Indian was riding ahead, his back toward Tigheman. But what good would that do, thought Dick, if the fellow suddenly led them into an encampment of outlaws?

THE brush of the ravine was chinery, thick and low. Half the time Shoshone Charlie, although but a dozen yards ahead, was all or partially concealed from Tigheman. The latter reflected that Shoshone, so screened, could turn about under cover and suddenly aim that long Winchester rifle at Tigheman's head. As this possibility struck him, Dick drew one of his automatics; he held it close to his side, but pointing straight ahead, to be ready in case the Indian might try any tricks.

Caroline Jones, riding last, saw the movement and Tigheman heard her half smothered exclamation of alarm. Then, almost at the same instant, his own gun wrist became rigid, tightened tensely on the pistol grip. Suddenly, without looking, its very heft told him something. He knew, in a flash of understanding, why the thing had not felt entirely natural in his grasp, back yonder where he had made the draw on the snowshoe rabbit. He could feel a lack of proper balance, somewhere. The gun was top-heavy—or else butt-light. The latter was the case, he reasoned. The gun was not loaded. He was suddenly as sure of it as if he could see the empty clip within. Too many times he had handled that gun to be fooled.

He knew that a .45 cartridge weighs nearly an ounce—that seven of them, a clip load, would weight nearly a half pound. Excavate nearly half a pound of brass and lead from the butt of a gun and one might fool a novice, but not Captain Dick Tigheman. The next time a clump of chinery screened him from Shoshone Charlie, he pressed the spring on the gun and drew out its clips; sure enough the clip was empty.

His hand flashed to the pocket of his coat, coming out with five cartridges, all that his fingers happened to grasp at a first random snatch. He slipped them into the clip, and jammed the clip home into the butt. He would have pumped a cartridge

into the chamber but he feared the click might be heard by the Indian ahead.

Shoshone was leading them astray, he knew now for sure. The empty gun was proof of foul play somewhere. Dick knew for a certainty that he had gone to bed last night with his guns loaded. He hadn't looked since then, but someone else had, evidently. During his sleep someone must have emptied his guns. Who? Who could have slipped into his room and performed such an act? Only three agents were possible, he conceded: Henry Suggs, Mayme Suggs, or Shoshone Charlie.

No doubt, decided Tigheman, they were all in together. At least Mayme was in league with Shoshone, for she had presented the Indian as a guide. Tigheman was willing to bet now that the bulging sack on the Indian's saddle horn did not contain bona fide supplies for Squad One.

Turning, he motioned for Caroline Jones to ride closer to his side. "Don't ask me how I know, but we've been handed a bum steer," Tigheman whispered, when she came, wide-eyed and apprehensive. "This one-eyed Indian is leading us, not to our friends, but somewhere else, probably to Louie Koonts. Now don't say a word. Just begin lagging behind. I'm going to tangle with Charlie. Probably I'll handle him all right; but he's more at home in the brush than I am, and there's a chance he'll get me, or get away. No, don't talk. Listen. If he gets me, or gets away, he'll take you to Koonts. So the minute I throw down on him, you run. Get as far as you can while I'm tangling with him. If I lick him, I'm after you. If not, well—get as far as you can. Turn and race your horse down this hollow to the main canyon. Then follow the creek to the basin—it can't be over eight miles. In the center of the basin you'll see a big log house. Your brother's pals will be there. Tell 'em what's happened and they'll know what to do. But chances are I'll handle Charlie all right and be right behind you."

"But, Captain Tigheman," began the girl, her usually dark face now quite pale. "You——"

"Don't argue with me," broke in Tigheman gruffly. "Do as I say. Start lagging behind. We can't waste any time because we may get led into an outlaw camp any minute. The instant I hold up the Indian, you run."

WITHOUT more words Tigheman turned away from Caroline, and spurred his horse until he was abreast of the rear pack mare. They were rounding a bend of the hollow. Beyond it there was a straightaway of perhaps fifty yards, not so brushy, and on it the Indian, Charlie, became fully exposed. Tigheman raised his gun and took deliberate aim at the man's back.

"Turn around, Shoshone," he called loudly. "I just loaded my gun, so you're covered. Mayme's trick didn't work."

The Indian's pony reared high, so sharply did Shoshone whirl him around. Yet Charlie did not disturb the balance of the rifle which lay across his saddle, nor did his scarred features betray either surprise or fear.

"That's right; don't try to use the Winchester," cautioned Tigheman, as he rode closer. "I don't want to kill you for fear Koonts might hear the shot. How far ahead is he, Charlie?"

The pack mares, crowded off the trail by Tigheman's swift advance upon the Indian, and entirely unaware of any impending clash, began cropping the last year's cured grass which grew among the scrub oak. Now Tigheman's ears told him that Caroline Jones was obeying his commands, for he could hear the retreating hoof beats of her horse, retracing its way down the ravine. That was a big relief, and he gave his entire attention to the Indian.

"How far ahead is that crook's camp you were leading us into, Charlie?" he demanded again.

But the Indian refused to answer. Stolidly he sat there, his one eye fixed balefully on Tigheman.

Tigheman baited him with more queries. He asked questions which he knew now should have been asked back there at the Suggs ranch. What were the names of the basin homesteaders for whom Shoshone claimed to be an errand runner? he asked. Repeating this for the third time, he finally got a rise from Charlie.

"Wooten," the Indian grunted. "Cholly no savvy other names. Long tam know Wooten."

"And a long time you know Louie Koonts, I'm betting," insisted Tigheman. "Was it you sneaked the bullets out of my gun last night?"

But again Charlie took refuge in stubborn silence, and Dick could get no further word out of him.

"Very well," announced Tigheman, who was anxious to get started after Caroline, "we're going to the basin, and we're going the way the map says to go. First I'll take your rifle. Hold it straight out with your left hand—no, not that one, the other —and hold your right hand over your head."

The Indian extended the Winchester as directed. Tigheman urged his horse a pace closer, and reached for the rifle. Shoshone was holding it by the middle. Just as Dick leaned forward to grasp it, in fact just as his fingers touched it, Charlie released it and allowed it to clatter to the ground between the horses. The incident appeared natural, as though the Indian had merely released his grip an accidental fraction of a second too soon. Now either one or the other of the men must dismount and get the rifle.

Tigheman elected to have the Indian do it.

"Get down and pick it up," he ordered; "and remember I've got a gun trained on your head."

Shoshone slipped to the ground. He stooped, fingers reaching for the rifle on the ground. Then like a flash he plucked, not the rifle but a long knife from his boot. Dick's gun roared as the Indian jumped under the belly of Tigheman's own horse, coming up on the other side. Tigheman, leaning donward to the left, had to shift his entire stance to face the man as he flashed into view on the right. But by then the horse was pitching, pitching hard and squealing. For as he had lept beneath its belly, Shoshone had pricked the animal with his blade.

Unbalanced by the sudden pitching of his horse, Tigheman missed his second shot. *Whish!* The Indian dived head-on up and at him, blade first. The steel bit into Tigheman, just above the heart, and he felt Shoshone's left hand clinging to his throat. The white man felt himself reeling from the saddle; yet even as he did so he smashed his gun barrel down on Shoshone's skull.

They hit the ground in a heap. The two pack mares and Shoshone's horse, frightened by the two shots, were off, stampeding through the chinery. The pitching horse, Tigheman's gray, was taking another direction. Luckily Dick lit on top of the Indian, whose hand was dislodged from the knife haft. Sprawling beneath Tigheman, the knife still sticking in Tigheman and drawing his blood, the Indian snatched again for the haft. With a final effort Dick smashed him again, over the head, with his gun. The brown hand relaxed its clutch, and Tigheman drew himself clear. Dizzily he fumbled for the knife, and with his own fingers he plucked it from his chest. For a moment he was conscious of distant, fading sounds, the retreat of Caroline Jones. Then he pitched forward, falling in a sick faint across the unconscious form of Shoshone Charlie.

CHAPTER VI

KOONTS

"FLASH," remarked big Louie Koonts to a smallish, dandified, gunless companion at Four Pines camp, "it looks like something's happened to delay Charlie. Very likely that girl insisted on coming on, and Charlie's leadin' her around in circles. I'll leave the Hodge boys here at the Lookout, and you and me won't wait any longer. Hodge, don't you get funny with the girl if she shows up; I don't want her hurt on my beat. All right, Flash, let's ride down and join the boys."

Koonts, a man with a heavy black beard and a commanding physique, guided his horse down a niche in the north rimrock, his object being to join and take personal command of the besiegers of the log house. Flash Forbes, who followed him, presented a considerable contrast to the leader. Whereas Koonts wore two large black-handled six-guns, Forbes wore

no weapons at all. Forbes was not a user of violence, but a man who lived by his wits. He was a clever penman and all around confidence man. Not being quick with a gun, he had brains enough not to wear one at all. Koonts would not have bothered taking him down to the fight now being waged in the basin except for the belief that Forbes' wits might be of more value in the siege than the guns of ten fat-headed ruffians.

Koonts had real reason for worry. Those seven long-legged homesteaders had usurped the gang's warm place and refused to give it up. For two days and two nights they had remained obstinately at bay in the log house, and Koonts was pretty raw about it. He had lost five men. Now he meant to take the homesteaders to a speedy cleaning, or know why.

As he descended the spruce slope, followed by Flash Forbes, Koonts planned his attack. There was no virtue in losing any more men, he reasoned. No use charging the log house frontally, for that was a play which had proved made to order for the defenders. Koonts, a gunman among gunmen, had never seen such shooting before in his life. He called himself a fancy shot, and was. But never before had he run bang up against such deadly accuracy at six hundred yards range as had been demonstrated by those Enfields in the log house.

Of course he could starve them out. But that might take weeks, for there was no telling how well those fellows had heeled themselves with grub and water. And Koonts was afraid his own crowd might quit, and drift, before the siege ended. They had nothing vital at stake, as had Koonts. The log house was the Koonts home, and the basin his domain. True, his wife had been dead these two years now, but nevertheless Koonts stood to lose a great deal by being chased from the basin. For years he had operated what in effect was a summer resort for crookdom. Hideouts, skulkers of all types seeking a port in the perennial storm of their lives, had boarded with Koonts, a Swede by the name of Jakie Johnson having done the cooking since the demise of Mrs. Koonts. And Koonts had made a good thing out of them.

For one thing they swelled the might of his arm against lawful invaders. They liked to loaf in the coolness of the basin, fishing in the creek, shooting deer in the hills. Thus they had provided a convenient garrison for Koonts, but now Koonts was afraid he might lose them. Dode Birch, one of his best guns, had already given notice that he meant to start in two days for Pocatello, Idaho. Montana Mike Mitchell was hinting among the others that Koonts was merely using them for pawns. A little more of this fighting, a few more bull's-eyes from the homesteaders in the log house, and the rest of the floating gang would be drifting away. Worse, they would spread the word among crookdom that Koonts couldn't hold his own basin, a rumor which would kill business for good.

A GOOD business, for while Koonts didn't charge his boarders any cash fee for board, merely assuming to trade them room and meals for their potential gunmanship, he had other ways of getting their money. It was naturally their habit to gamble among themselves throughout the season, with the inevitable result that as weeks passed nine men out of ten became broke; while the tenth man would become possessed of a bulging wallet. In time this tenth man would leave the basin to engage in his own particular specialty of crime. No one, except Koonts, ever had noticed that such a man never came back. No one but Koonts knew that the one-eyed Indian, Shoshone Charlie, always was hiding at the lower Gap, to ambush the purseful tenth man and deliver the purse to Koonts. Yes, it had been a good business—for Koonts. He played both ends against the middle. From all the wilderness underworld these boob outlaws came flocking to his ranch, garrisoned it, then left their stealings, without knowing it, in his own rapacious grasp.

And so he didn't want them drifting away, spreading the word that he was done. Most of all he didn't want Flash Forbes to drift away. Forbes was the one purseful boarder whom Koonts had never

been able to dupe. Forbes had money, Koonts was sure, money and lots of it, hidden somewhere in the basin. For Forbes, a professional gambler, was too smart to gamble with thieves. Gambling was work to Forbes, and he didn't work in the basin. Yet, outside, his repute was such that Koonts knew the fellow must have a fancy stake, somewhere. In fact Forbes himself boasted of it. Each trip he brought in more, and concealed it in a private cache before presenting himself at the log house. Thus gunless, purseless, he knew he was always safe.

But right now, conceded Koonts, the thing to do was to get possession of the log house. He recalled a strategy he had used years ago in a similar case. It was simple, fairly logical, and even if it failed was cheaper than yesterday's fiasco of direct attack.

In a short while he and Flash Forbes reached the lower fringe of timber, and joined a score of hard looking men who were skulking behind rocks and trees. They were a vicious bunch, soured on the world just now and especially at those sharpshooting homesteaders yonder in the log house. Five of their original number were dead; the rest had skulked back out of range to the timber. Many of them were about ready to quit.

One of the most outstanding figures among them was Montana Mike Mitchell. Mitchell was as big as Koonts, florid, with the manners and voice of a bull alligator. He was peevish today, and started yowling the moment Koonts showed up.

"T'ell with yore damn' bloodtrap, Koonts!" he bawled. "I'm ridin' north. Them homesteaders is pizen and I'm done. Smoke the weasels outa yore own henhouse, Koonts."

"You're quittin', eh?" yelled Koonts, barking his retort in tones no less bellicose. "Yuh big yeller-bellied bum! Quittin', huh? Yuh let me hand-feed yuh two-three peaceful seasons, and then the first time bullets fly yuh run. Git t'ell outa here, then; go back to Montany and git hung. Anyways don't come sneakin' back down here to the basin, 'cause I'll shoot yuh on sight, yuh low down, dirty slob of a hoss-thief."

TO CALL a horse-thief a horse-thief is to invite his bullet. Mike's heavy face flushed black as a March storm cloud as his hand flashed to hip. Koonts was expecting it; he beat Mitchell to the draw, shot him twice in the stomach. The horse-thief staggered to his knees; his gun was blazing but his aim was ruined. Koonts plugged him again in the same spot, then, as Mike hit the sod, ended his yowlings with a brain shot. Before the smoke was fairly lifted from the scene, Koonts launched out in a harangue to the others. He had to talk fast, and he did.

"Say, did yuh see that?" he bawled. "Got sore and went for his gun and I had to shoot his fool head off. What else could I do? Now listen, fellers. Mike's our last dead man in this war, 'cause I got a scheme what'll work. And say, Dode, I understand you aim to hike out for Pocatello. Well, that's all right. Only jest hang around till I pull this scheme of mine, that's all I ask."

"What scheme?" asked Dode Birch, a pockmarked rustler from Idaho.

"We'll divide into two bunches—the old fake sheriff raid," explained Koonts. "Them guys in the log house is all tenderfoots except Earl Wooten. Now everybody who ain't never seen Wooten, stand to one side."

The group of outlaws had been somewhat disconcerted by the swift killing of Montana Mike Mitchell. Muttering such mouthings as: "What's all this guff?" and "Wooten? T'ell with Wooten! What about Mitchell?" and with every man's hand on his six-gun, the score of men nevertheless began milling into two separated divisions. About half were outlaws from faraway parts, who claimed never to have seen Earl Wooten. Others were not sure but what Wooten might have seen them in Lander in times past. In the end about ten men stood off to the right, a similar number remaining on the left.

"You gents," instructed Koonts, pointing to those on the left, "are deputies, vigilantes, or whatever yuh want to call yerselves. Here, take these stars I picked

off them corpses last summer." He tossed a couple of bright, nickel stars into the left hand group. "The rest of us is outlaws," Koonts went on. "You sheriffs sneak down through the brush and git into Mulberry Canyon. Ride into the basin plumb peaceful, headin' fer the house. 'Bout that time the rest of us'll be makin' a attack from here. You see us, turn, and come ashootin'. Two er three of us'll fake falls like we was hit. The rest of us'll fan the breeze, the sheriffs chasin' hard on our trails. They ketch a couple of us and tie us up, then ride peaceful to the house. Them homesteaders open the door and fall on yore necks. Plumb gravy, from then on. Let's get goin'."

"I don't think much of that trick," piped a little sawed-off bowleg in the left hand crowd. "We all don't look like no sheriffs. They'd spot us and blow hell out of us."

There arose a babel of assent and dissent. Some thought the scheme would work and some thought it wouldn't. Koonts appealed to Flash Forbes, whom he had often used as a yes man in emergencies, and Forbes insisted that the scheme was sound. Even with this support Koonts was only able to win six men over to his side.

These six, however, volunteered for the roles of possemen. Koonts himself claimed that Earl Wooten had never seen him in the flesh, except at a great distance, and offered to make a seventh fake sheriff. Flash Forbes said that this would make a party large enough. Forbes himself offered to ride with it, merely to swell its numbers while they were out of range from the house, and fake a fall as though hit.

Thus a party of eight was formed and rode off down a path through the brush toward the mouth of Mulberry Canyon. Actually both Koonts and Forbes knew that there was much weakness to this scheme, and that it might easily fail. Wooten might be hard to convince. Wooten knew Sheriff Hicks, and might wonder why Hicks was not with the posse. Also Wooten, having been raised in Fremont County, knew all the Lander crowd and it would be hard to make a posse which contained none of his acquaintances look convincing. Still, Koonts was for the scheme because he was desperate to regain the log house, and he could think of no alternate.

Neither could Flash Forbes. Until, when arriving at the mouth of Mulberry Canyon, a girl, a very small girl wearing a big hat and boy's clothes, rode squarely into the midst of the eight fake sheriffs. Then there flashed to the wily brain of Forbes a brilliant alternate to Koonts' scheme.

KOONTS himself immediately identified the girl. Beyond a doubt she must be the one whose intended invasion had been reported by Mayme Suggs. Assuming that she had been guided by Shoshone Charlie and that Charlie had attempted to mislead her, in some way she had managed to elude her guide.

Koonts scowled. As mentioned in his letter to Mrs. Suggs, the outlaw would have preferred the girl's absence to her presence in the basin. He did not believe in ransom—not with women. He feared the Nemesis which he knew usually follows and avenges the maltreaters of women as he feared hell-fire itself.

But Flash Forbes displayed his exceptionally fine teeth and stepped forward to greet Caroline Jones. He had a weakness for pretty girls, and this one, he admitted immediately, was far beyond the common run. It was in the hopes that Charlie would bring the girl in that Flash had lingered up at Four Pines Lookout. In certain levels of society Forbes was looked upon as a ladies' man.

Not only that, but just now he saw a particular end to be gained by this girl's presence. So Flash doffed his hat and grinned at her.

"Excuse me, ma'am; but have you seen anything of a low down half-breed by the name of Shoshone Charlie?" he asked. "Wooten sent us out to tie that crook by the heels. He's some bad medicine, Wooten claims."

Caroline Jones, although frightened by the apparition of the octette of toughs, nevertheless clutched eagerly at the point that they were hostile to Shoshone Charlie.

"Oh, yes, I've seen him," she cried. "And he's killing Dick Tigheman. Please go help Dick, won't you? And where am I? And how far is it to Eagle Nest Basin? And hurry; please go back and help Dick Tigheman."

Hysterically the girl's queries poured forth, one upon another. Excitement had almost done for her.

Koonts, turning to Flash Forbes, winked. He saw the gambler's strategy, and applauded it. Inasmuch as the girl was here they might as well use her for a purpose.

"Oh, yes, Tigheman," spoke up Koonts. Tigheman, he reasoned, must be some friend of Wooten's. "Yep," he went on, "Wooten said fer us to look out fer Tigheman, too, and help him git into the basin. How far back is Tigheman? And was he by hisself when Charlie jumped him?"

"Yes," wailed Caroline Jones; "he was fighting the Indian alone when I left them."

"How far back?" asked Koonts warily.

The girl, who had been galloping madly down canyon for she knew not how long, had no accurate idea of distance. Her guess was about seven miles.

"All right, miss; we'll take care of that matter just as soon as we git you safe in the big house," Koonts said. "You're right on the edge of the basin now and we'll make a run for it. That lowdown Koonts outfit's up yonder in the bresh a leetle ways, but we'll pertect yuh, lady; leave it to us. Get off yore hoss and set down by the crik a while, and rest yerself while Dode Birch here scouts around to see if the coast is clear. Too bad yuh run into all this grief, but we'll soon have yuh with your friends."

Then Koonts led the man Birch aside.

"Fog back to the main bunch and give 'em the lowdown on this new play," he whispered. "Tell 'em the posse gag is off —we got a new one what beats it seven ways from Sunday. 'Nstead of bein' a bunch of sheriffs, we're escort to the girl, savvy? Once we get out into the open lush, the gang attacks us, shootin', and we stage a runnin' fight to the house."

Dode Birch allowed his pocked cheeks to wrinkle into a grin of appreciation.

"Now yuh got a scheme what'll work, Koonts," he admitted.

"Work?" exclaimed Koonts. "It'll work like a dream. This woman fills our hand like a queen full. Tell the boys to shoot high, but fast. And as for the man Tigheman she talks about, I reckon Shoshone's got him pinned to the sod long ago. Hop along now, Dode."

CHAPTER VII

THE FAKE ESCORT

SQUAD ONE, a complete line-up with the single exception of Mr. Hubert Jones of Birmingham, Alabama, were engaged in stubbornly defending the log house on section 8, a rambling two-story structure which was centered in the great lush plain of the basin. The position was good. For a mile in all directions there was no shelter for attack, other than the fringe of brush which lined the twists of Mulberry Creek, and the stirrup high lush itself. This grass was yellow, like ripened wheat, being last year's untrampled stand. On this thirtieth day of April the brush along the creek was brown and unleaved. Beyond the plain however, on the slopes ascending to the rimrocks, was first a narrow belt of scrub oak and then, higher up, a bank of evergreen.

Even now, before ripening rays of summer suns had touched it with a final glory, the vast pocket in the hills was conceded by Squad One to be a tempting estate, a domain well worth the striving for. For while only nine bottom sections were tillable and timberless, these nine effectually controlled some thirty odd more sections lying higher and on the wooded slopes; thus the pocket was potentially a twenty thousand acre range built to the order and command of whoever achieved dominion of the arena's tillable bottom. Squad One admitted the justice of Wooten's oft repeated eulogies. In fact they had greeted sight of it with an enthusiastic whoop, had set to work cutting logs to build seven separate cabins on seven separate outer sections of the lush.

Then the attack by Koonts. Anticipating it, the men had stocked the log house on section 8, the section reserved for Hubert Jones and which was still unfiled Government land. Plenty of food and water had they stored in the house. Now they were at bay in it, had been for two days and a night.

It was late in the afternoon of the last day of April, and everything had been quiet since three o'clock. Ex-Corporal James Goff was squinting out of one of the north windows toward the chinery fringe, a mile and a quarter away.

"I reckon they're waitin' for night, fellahs," he remarked. "Get all the rest you can while the resting's good."

"Let 'em come," growled Cowboy Wooten.

Wooten was stretched at full length on the floor behind Goff, blowing smoke rings at the ceiling. "We'll keep whittlin' 'em down, and purty soon what's left of 'em 'll hightail fer tamer country."

"Hope the moon's shinin' again tonight," offered Zeke Fleming, the redhead from Iowa. "And I'm glad we tore down that old cow shed, so they ain't got nothin' to slip up behind."

Yesterday the boys had torn down an old shed back of the house, in order to remove it as a possible screen for attackers. There were no other outstructures, excepting a pole corral and an exterior earth-covered cellar. Neither the pole corral nor the slight mound of the dugout's covering offered consequential screen for raiders.

Buck Conroy, the lantern-jawed Texan, was standing before a second of the north windows looking through a pair of army binoculars out across the lush. Many were the appurtenances of the late war among the seven defenders. Each of them wore an O. D. flannel shirt and all of them but Stamford, the lean, bespectacled Bostonian, wore legging and army pants. Stamford's long and skinny legs were encased in tailored corduroys which were tucked into brightly new laced boots. Rifles were all Enfields. Empty brass shells littering the floor indicated that there had been considerable recent use of these weapons.

"They ain't goin' to wait till night," informed Conroy suddenly. "I see a big gang of them comin' right now, on horseback, ridin' out of the brush."

The others assembled at Buck's window. Trading the binoculars about, each in turn was able to count fourteen men riding slowly toward them, from the north timber, still fully a mile away.

"Suicide, huh!" ejaculated Bud McCune. "We'll fix them fellers."

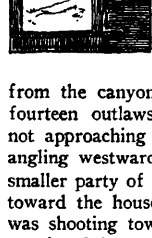
"But look yonder to the left," cried Conroy. "There's another bunch, comin' from the northwest, right out of the canyon. They're gonna two-time us, huh?"

Goff snatched the binoculars and scanned the last-reported party, which seemed to be smaller in number than the crowd approaching directly from the north.

"Eight," Goff counted. "And say, shoot me if they ain't got a kid with 'em. What do you know about that?"

In turn they took the binoculars and looked the second bunch over. As reported by Goff, there were eight of them, galloping directly toward the house.

"That ain't no kid," announced Zeke Fleming. "It's a girl. Sure it is. And gee, fellers, that other bunch is tyin' into 'em. They're shootin'; look."



FAR out there on the lush, nearly a mile away, spots of smoke arose, and the ears of Squad One could plainly make out the sounds of rifle fire. Closer came the eight riders from the canyon. The other crowd, the fourteen outlaws from the north, were not approaching the log house but were angling westward toward the second and smaller party of riders. Not a bullet came toward the house. Each group of riders was shooting toward the other. It was a running fight, all of it still entirely beyond range of Squad One. It could easily be observed however that the eight men in whose midst rode a young girl were turning in their saddles, firing briskly at the oncoming outlaws. One of the latter, then another, threw up his arms and fell from his horse. Now one of the lesser party pitched from saddle to ground. The girl's escort,

now composed of but seven men, came furiously on.

"Reinforcements for us, by jiminy!" cried Hogan. "But who is the girl with them? Never mind. If they get a thousand yards nearer they'll be under our guns. Be ready to crack down on those outlaws, boys, and unbolt the door so the girl's bunch can get in."

Fleming hurried to unbolt the door. Then Squad One took positions at windows, ready to send a stream of bullets into the attackers from the north whenever they arrived within reasonable range.

They saw another of the outlaws, apparently struck by a bullet, plunge from horse to ground. Then another of the girl's escort seemed to be hit. He dropped his rifle but, although falling forward and clutching his mount's mane, he retained his seat.

"If we can jest get that bunch in here this war'll be duck soup," announced Buck Conroy. To encourage the smaller party of riders, he took a shot out toward the outlaws although they were still considerably out of range.

"Our bunch is gainin'," grinned Wooten. "They got the fastest hosses. They're hittin' it up such a clip the Koonts bunch can't head 'em off. Leave the door stand wide open, Zeke, so they can tumble right in. Then all hands crack down on the Koonts crowd."

EVERYONE could plainly see now that the girl who for some unknown reason was being escorted to them at such a risk was extremely young and comely, and also that she was very much frightened. She was clinging to her horse's neck as though for dear life. The minds of Squad One could in no way associate her with outlaws, and thus they were convinced that the men with her were friendly to her, and thus to themselves. Not a bullet fired by the fourteen attackers came toward the house; all their fire was being directed toward the lesser group.

On came the latter, and at last they thundered up to the porch of the log house. A big, black-bearded man with a star on his vest scooped the girl from her saddle, leaped up the cabin's steps and plunged through the open doorway. His mates followed, pellmell. Squad One's attention was now acutely engaged with the fourteen attacking outlaws, who were just on the verge of range. The boys sent a volley out across the lush, a volley which halted the raiders. One of them, about a thousand yards away, was seen to drop his rifle and grasp his shoulder, as though stung by a bullet. Then all fourteen outlaws dismounted and lay prone in the lush.

"We stopped 'em, by golly," crowed Bud McCune. With a cheerful grin he turned to inspect the visitors who had just tumbled in. "We——"

But his grin froze, and he stood there agape. There was a Colt's .45 poking into his lower rib, the weapon being held by a man with a pock-marked face. The big black-beard, who had dropped the half-swooned girl like a chunk, had a similar gun to the ribs of Goff.

His fellows were doing likewise to the other six members of Squad One. Most of the boys had not turned from the windows yet, and the invading guns were pressed against their several shoulder blades from the rear.

"My name's Koonts," informed Blackbeard. "You jaspers drop them rifles, or get blowed wide open. Call the rest of the boys up, Schofield."

The man named Schofield shot three times in rapid succession with his left hand gun, without troubling to remove the right hand one from Hogan's back.

"They're comin'," he announced a moment later, as the hooves of more galloping horses could be heard approaching through the lush. Ex-Corporal Goff, accusing himself bitterly, looked over his shoulder out of the window. He saw the rest of the outlaws closing up swiftly. Far out there on the grass, four men who had faked being shot from their saddles were now on their feet and remounting. The entire trick was plain as day now—but too late.

Then Goff's eyes moved toward the girl, who was just arising terrifiedly from the floor. Goff could see that her terror was genuine. She, too, had been cheated; she had not conspired to deceive.

Her face was as white as death, and Goff saw her lips move.

"He told me—" she began accusingly, pointing to Koonts.

"Yep, he told you some cute lie, I'll bet, miss," broke in Goff. "But who are you, anyway?"

"I'm Caroline Jones, Hubert's sister," the girl announced.

"Hubert's sister!" echoed Squad One in chorus.

The information so dumbfounded them that they lost the few precious seconds which they otherwise might have employed to desperately risk death and grapple with their captors. It could have done them no good, under the circumstances. But a moment later it was more than ever beyond consideration. Fifteen more men arrived, fourteen from the north and one from the northwest, and came rushing into the house. Everyone of them had two guns in his hands except the man from the Northwest, who was the unarmed gambler, Flash Forbes. Squad One was grasped fore and aft. Ropes began to cut their ankles and their wrists. In a few moments they were trussed hand and foot and tumbled to the floor.

CHAPTER VIII

THE WORST HOLE

"WHAT next, Koonts?" the man Schofield asked. "Yuh want these fellers taken out and shot?"

"Just as soon as I clear one thing up," assented Koonts. He now addressed Caroline Jones, who was shrinking miserably against the room's wall, a pitiful thing, her tiny figure trembling with fear and despair. "Girl," barked Koonts, "you made talk of a man named Tigheman. Who the hell is he?"

The seven bound men on the floor pricked up their ears. Tigheman! So Tigheman was around somewhere. In that case all hope wasn't lost. With acute suspense they gave ears to the inquisition of Miss Jones.

Even if it would have done any good the girl was too agitated for any attempt at guile. Little by little Koonts prodded from her what she knew, that a Captain Tigheman, war comrade of these homesteaders, had accompanied her from Lander. At the Suggs ranch they had accepted guidance from Shoshone Charlie. Somewhere along the route Tigheman had become suspicious—the girl had left him fighting with the Indian.

"The fact that he didn't come after the girl proves Charlie got him," deduced Koonts. "Charlie of course went on to Four Pines Lookout, and that's why we ain't seen him. When he gets wise to what's happened he'll come on down here."

"Yep, it's a cinch Shoshone got this Tigheman," agreed Schofield. "That winds everything up, don't it? The sooner we get these other fellers buried the sooner we'll be safe. Why not do it now, Koonts?"

"Let's make sure about Tigheman, first," insisted Koonts. "If he got away, he may round up the whole U. S. army and come after us. If he does, we might keep these boys here to trade for our getaway. But it's a hundred to one, of course, that Tigheman's dead. So just as soon as Shoshone shows up and says he done fer Tigheman, we'll put these other babies to sleep.

"What about the girl?" asked the pock-marked outlaw, Dode Birch. He sidled up to her, his yellow teeth expanding in a grin. The gambler, Flash Forbes, was also displaying a keen personal interest in the feminine prisoner.

Now Koonts turned toward her himself, frowning puzzledly. As from the first, he was annoyed at her presence. Taking a tip from Forbes, he had used her as a pawn with which to capture the house, but that being an accomplished fact now, he began wondering how he could get rid of her.

For Koonts, in his time, had learned one thing and learned it well. He had mentioned it in his communication to Mayme Suggs—Wyoming would stand for a certain amount of man killings—especially in unwitnessed fights between would-be squatters and would-be nesters; but it was hard to laugh off maltreatment of a woman. Koonts knew that nothing magnetized posses and vigilantes like the abduction or maltreatment of a girl.

Yet what was he to do with this one? He dared not let her go back to Lander, to raise a hue and cry before he had finished this fight and wiped out every track

and trace of it. Actually Koonts did not care so much whether the girl became harmed or not; what he feared was that he, Koonts, would be blamed for such harm. Whatever happened to her was all right, so long as it didn't implicate Koonts.

So he began craftily to scheme some way of passing the buck of her potentially dangerous presence to one of his men, in such a way that, if she was ever lucky enough to make connections with the law, she would not accuse Koonts of having mistreated her. He even thought of a way to make her think that he, Koonts, had saved her. A way that would direct attention away from the basin and away from Koonts, sacrificing only the man who was foolish enough to accept the buck Koonts meant to offer him.

"What about the girl?" the pock-marked Birch was repeating.

"What's it to you, Dode?" Flash Forbes, the gambler, sneered from the corner of his twisted lips. "Louis and I'll take care of her."

KOONTS, turning to Birch, said slowly, "Listen, Dode, girls is bad medicine, and I'd just as soon get rid of this one. Don't dare send her to Lander, but I might drop her at some rail point west of here, say Pocatello, Idaho. You was figgerin' on trailin' that way in a day or two, weren't yuh, Dode?"

Birch licked his lips, then grinned smirkingly toward Miss Jones.

"Yep, I was headin' fer Idaho, Koonts."

"Well," said Koonts, "maybe I'll send the girl over there with you. Safer to drop her there than in Lander. Any way it'll give us a few days longer to swab up everything here."

"Yuh gonna turn her loose?" objected Schofield, much amazed. "Why, she'll snitch."

"Shut up, Schofield," barked Koonts. Then, seeing that Birch and Forbes were not looking at him, but had eyes only for the girl, he winked at Schofield.

"Snitch?" he whispered at a later opportunity. "Not on us. You leave the girl to me." Aloud he said, "She's a woman, and I won't have her found in the basin dead or alive. Somebody's gotta take her out, and it might as well be Dode."

Flash Forbes turned suddenly to Koonts. "Say," announced the gambler. "I'm headin' west myself tomorrow. What about lettin' me take the girl? I guess I'm more her style than Dode Birch?"

Birch snarled. He whirled on Forbes, his hand clawing upward along his thigh. "Whatta yuh mean—more her style? Why, yuh damn' yeller purp, you're jest a common lowdown crook, same as the rest of us. Another crack like that and I'll take a shot at you, Forbes."

"Cut out the yowling, men," broke in Koonts, coming between Forbes and Birch.

But his mind was already scheming to take advantage of the common desire of the two men to escort the girl from the basin. The glimmerings of a scheme came to him by which he could make considerable capital out of the situation.

"Now cut out the yowling, men," went on Koonts, "and I'll decide who takes the girl later. First we gotta wait and see what report Shoshone makes concerning the man Tigheman. Or maybe Tigheman licked Shoshone. If he did, what would he do? First I thought he'd head for Lander and raise a posse. But would he? Maybe not. Tigheman wouldn't know we took this house; he'd think his friends were still in it, and we was still up yonder at Four Pines Camp, where Shoshone was trying to steer Tigheman. So Tigheman, thinking his friends was at the house, would come making a dash for it himself. So even if he licked Charlie, we'll get him here if we lay low, because he'll come foggin' right into a trap. Anyway we won't finish off these seven long-legged fellers here on the floor till we've bagged Tigheman."

"Aw, Shoshone fixed that feller's clock, all right," growled one of the gangsters.

"Chances are he did," admitted Schofield. "And yet again, as Louie says, maybe Tigheman killed Shoshone. Let's wait and see."

Schofield strolled to a window and looked northward over the lush. Several of the gangsters went down a corridor toward the cabin's kitchen, to investigate

what stores of grub the homesteaders had on hand. Forbes and Birch stood scowling at each other, one on either side of Caroline Jones.

Koonts, looking at them, began perfecting a scheme in his mind. He saw a way to get money, plenty of it, and at the same time not only save the girl but put himself in fairly solid with her. The common desires of Birch and Forbes to escort the girl out of the basin—Koonts had no doubt but that their motives were vicious, brutish, that the girl would be about as safe with either as she would be with a man-eating tiger—planted in the mind of Koonts the seed of a profitable intrigue. It was an intrigue which should bear four fruits: safety for the girl, doom for her escort, gratitude from the girl toward Koonts, and the seizure of Forbes' hidden cache of savings.

WHILE Koonts was pondering absorbedly on his scheme, he heard an ejaculation from Schofield at the window.

"There comes someone, now," announced Schofield.

A mile away across the lush a rider was seen coming, approaching from the general direction of Mulberry Canyon.

"Lay low, everybody," announced Koonts alertly. "It may be Tigheman. If it is he'll crack straight into us like a fly into a spider web. What kind of a hoss is he forkin', Schofield?"

"A gray horse," answered Schofield. "But that's all I can make out from here."

"Not Shoshone then," decided one of the outlaws, a lanky two-gunner by the name of Seven-up Cox. "Charlie uses a buckskin."

"He mighta changed hosses at the Lookout," suggested Koonts. "They's two—three grays in the remuda. Whatsa matter, gal?"

His attention had been called by a moan from Caroline Jones. Her face white and her eyes welling with tears, the girl was staring across the room and out of a window, at a distant loping dot of gray. Tigheman's horse, she knew, was a gray. So the oncomer was Tigheman! In which case he must have conquered the one-eyed savage, Shoshone Charlie. But to what end? Here he came, riding straight into the clutches of Koonts.

As this fact struck Caroline she uttered a loud shriek; then she bounded across the room toward the door with the obvious purpose of warning Dick Tigheman. Koonts caught her, snatching her like a chip as she made to pass him, and one of his great ham-like hands stopped the shriekings of her mouth. It was then that Schofield noticed a small, black, double-barrelled instrument lying on the floor. He picked it up, a pair of army binoculars.

Through these he looked again and to better advantage out across the lush.

"Let her bawl, Koonts; 'cause Tigheman can't hear her," he announced in a moment. "That feller comin' is Shoshone Charlie, lopin' along to break the sad news about this gal's soldier-boy friend."

Caroline Jones swooned. When she came to she was locked in one of the cabin's sleeping rooms. Thus she did not hear Shoshone's report, which would have cheered her, because the news was not as bad as Schofield had predicted.

Shoshone, according to his report, had had a fight with Tigheman. His knife had gashed Tigheman's chest at the same moment when the white man's gun butt had thumped down on Shoshone's head. When the Indian came to his senses the sun was two hours lower. He had found considerable of Tigheman's blood, but not Tigheman. Shoshone's rifle and knife were gone, and thus the Indian was not tempted to trail his late antagonist. The only horse he could find readily happened to be Tigheman's gray, on which Charlie had proceeded to Four Pines Lookout. The two men stationed there had observed the success of Koonts' latest raid, and thus Shoshone had proceeded to the log house.

Squad One, helpless on the floor, heard the Indian's report. Knowledge that the captain was alive naturally fed them a weak hope. They had heard Koonts' decree—that they were not to be shot until Tigheman's doom was certain.

"Well," spoke up Koonts now, pursuing this policy, "we'll put these jaspers where they'll stay put. That old dugout cellar outside is a good place. Schofield, you and

Cox see they're tied up real good and throw em down there. And you, George, lock the door of the dugout and then set on it."

Whereupon the bindings, wrists and ankles, were made knottier and more secure upon the seven six-foot lengths of manly youth which lay upon the floor. Then the prisoners were dragged outside, across the ten or so yards of ground which separated the house from the dugout, and tumbled down steep steps therein. The place was the common type of storm cellar used on Western farms, roofed with poles which supported about two feet of dirt, the roof being only slightly above the natural surface of the ground.

Thus Squad One found itself sprawling in a heap on the flood of a damp and smelly cave. Darkness enclosed their earth-walled prison as the oblique door at the head of the steps was slammed shut. A padlock clicked in its hasp.

"You're smotherin' me, gazabos," mumbled Bud McCune from the bottom of the heap. He wriggled his head clear from under Stamford's legs and spit out a mouthful of dirt.

Bound as they were, those on top began to squirm one way or the other to give relief to those underneath. Ex-Corporal Goff found that his nose was bleeding, knew that it was because that member had scraped the steps as he had been shoved headfirst into the hole. His hands were tied; all he could do was to let it bleed.

Suddenly Zeke Fleming let out a screech, and began kicking wildly with his bound feet. He kicked Hogan, who was next to him, in the chin. Hogan was about to kick back at him when the ex-law student was aware of the same nauseating touch which had impelled the outburst of Fleming. Hogan did not scream, but his blood ran cold. Something repulsively clammy crawled over his back—a snake of huge girth. It touched Stamford, then Goff; when Bud McCune felt its tail tickling his bound wrists he lost his nerve, and began blubbering like a baby. It was only a bull snake, and it was to save their lives. But Squad One didn't know that.

George Shultz, the outlaw on guard above, heard the nature of the complaints below and seemed to think it a good joke. Moving to the window of the log house, he called in to Koonts.

"There's a snake in that dugout, Louie," he reported; "and it's ridin' them fellers barebacked and without no hackamore, neither."

"Snake!" echoed Koonts. "Well, that's not so bad. If they die of snake-bite nobody can hang me for it, 'cause I didn't know the snake was there. Now go back and set on that door, Shultz."

CHAPTER IX

"TAKE THIS GUN AND USE IT"

SHULTZ went over and sat down on the oblique portal of the dugout. Inside the house Koonts again gave ear to the argument between Dode Birch and Flash Forbes. Each wanted to take the girl out of the basin. Koonts listened, every now and then putting in a sly oar himself. He appeared to be taking the side of Birch, although this was merely for the purpose of baiting Forbes.

Actually Koonts knew that Flash was going to win the dispute. For Koonts meant to put the proposition on a money basis, and he knew that that ex-gambler could easily outbid the pock-marked ruffian, Birch. Now, as always, Koonts was out after the big money. He had a vision of a big clean-up; for years he had duped his followers, at least all those worth duping except Flash Forbes. Now he saw an opportunity to find out all about the hidden cache of Forbes' winnings, and to strip it at will.

But first he wanted to have a talk with the girl, Caroline Jones. So, leaving Birch and Forbes at their dispute, he strolled back down the narrow corridor which separated the cabin's main room from its kitchen, and stopped before a certain door which stood midway of that corridor.

From a pocket he took a key. Then, from under his left arm, he produced a .38 caliber six-gun. He broke the gun and assured himself that it was loaded. Then he snapped it shut, put the key into the door's lock, opened the door and, gun in hand, advanced into the room.

Caroline Jones was sitting there upon a couch. Stark and terrible fear choked her scream as she saw Koonts advancing with the gun. But the big black-bearded outlaw held the weapon by the muzzle; far from menacing the prisoner, he was extending the grip to her.

She could hardly believe her ears when he said, "Take this gun, and when the time comes, use it. Stick it in your pocket and don't let anybody know yuh got it."

Urged by the courage of desperation, Caroline reached out and snatched the weapon from him. She pointed it waveringly at Koonts. The intent to shoot him stood in her eyes.

"Naw, don't use it on me," Koonts hastened to say. "I'm standin' by yuh, ain't I? Shoot me and then where'd yuh be? I'm all that's between yuh and that pack of wolves, out there. The fact I'm givin' yuh a gun, a loaded gun, proves I mean well by yuh."

The intent in the girl's eyes wavered and died. True, she reasoned, Koonts would not have given her a gun if he had meant to harm her.

"Why did you do it then?" she asked wonderingly.

"There ain't no trick in it," insisted Koonts. "I want to get shed of yuh, that's all. Likewise I don't want yuh to git hurt. Can't send yuh back to Lander, for reasons yuh can guess. But I don't mind sendin' yuh west, to Idaho, with a man what's trailin' that way. He may get brash. If he does, shoot him. He won't know yuh got a gun, which'll give yuh a big advantage. If he gets brash with yuh on the way, shoot him dead. See?"

Caroline was looking now with a horrified fascination, first at Koonts, then at the gun in her hand. She could hardly trust his motives, but the loaded gun was indeed convincing. Certainly it was reassuring in her plight. Yes, she could and would shoot the first man who offered to touch her. Failing that, she could always shoot herself.

"What are you going to do with the seven men you have tied up?" she managed to asked Koonts.

"Oh, them!" returned Koonts slyly. "I got 'em locked up. I offered to let 'em go clean if they'd promise to skin out and let me have this basin. But they're bullheaded. They haven't agreed yet. Reckon I'll have to work on 'em two-three days. But you'll be gone by then."

"Oh, I hope they do agree," exclaimed the girl quickly and fervently. "This valley is not worth so much fighting. And where's Captain Tigheman?"

"Never seen him," stated Koonts. "Him and me ain't met yet. But the deal goes fer him, too. All I want's the basin and this house. Now you git some rest, gal. Nobody's gonna bother you here. And remember, if the man I send you off with gets brash, gun him; gun him right."

With these words the outlaw abruptly left her. Outside her door he paused and grinned broadly in his beard. He had her fooled, he was sure. Giving her that gun had been a clever move. It was indeed loaded, and he genuinely hoped she would use it if necessary, but above all it made his later lie sound convincing. Actually he had no thought of turning his male captives loose. With them he was willing to take his chances. If they disappeared, they were men, adventurous men who had merely come to grief. They were not like a girl. Wyoming was not in the habit of rising up on its hind legs and avenging the fatalities between squatters and homesteaders.

The girl was the big firebrand in his hands, and Koonts prided himself on having handled it cleverly. He had won her gratitude. She could hardly accuse him of mistreatment, now that he put a gun in her hands. Added to that the fact that she had been his pawn in taking the log house, and was again to be his pawn in gaining possession of a large sum of money possessed by Flash Forbes, Koonts could not forbear to applaud himself.

AND now, as to Forbes and Dode Birch. Each was a blackguard, he knew; each doubtless had his own private scheme of abducting the girl, of taking her any place except to safety. The point was that each wanted the job, wanted it bad enough, Koonts had no doubt, to pay for it.

Very well, let the highest bidder win. Let him who would grease Koonts' covetous palm with the largest bid in cash take the girl. That would be Forbes. Birch, the improvident ruffian, could probably not raise an even hundred dollars. Forbes could, easily, but he would have to go to his cache to get it. Not the insignificant increment which Forbes would go there to seek, but the cache itself, the mother roll —that was what Koonts was after.

And he would get it. Shoshone Charlie would follow Forbes. He would spy upon the man's cache. Nor would the Indian harm Forbes; all he would do would be to spy out the hiding place. Let Flash Forbes go to his wilderness bank, draw out the small needed sum, return and pay it to Koonts, take the girl, and go.

Let him play false or true with her; Koonts didn't care. If he played her false, let him get shot for his pains; again Koonts didn't care. The important thing was that he himself would not be blamed. All he would have to do would be to loot Forbes' cache at his leisure.

With this in his mind he went up front and successively sought conferences with Birch and with Forbes.

"Money talks," he told each of them. "And the biggest roll talks the loudest."

Leaving each with this germ of thought to chew on, he next called aside an outlaw by the name of Oakes.

"Oakes," he said, "everything's slick. We get rid of the girl and no questions asked. The gink named Tigheman I'm convinced is done for. If the worst comes to the worst, he ain't dead, and'll show up with a gang. In that case we got seven of his pals to trade for our getaway. That's why I ain't croaked 'em yet. But if we don't hear nothin' of Tigheman by tomorrow night we'll croak 'em anyway. Now, Oakes, I got a job fer you. Yuh take a note to Mayme Suggs. I'm gonna make her send Hank Suggs to Lander. You foller him, keep outa sight and find out what the town knows. Be gettin' a fast hoss ready while I write the note to Mayme."

While Oakes sought a mount, Koonts wrote:

Mayme:

I got the house, and everything's slick, but I can't take no chances of it happening again. We got to plaster a homestead filing on section 8, center of the basin. Make Hank file it. Then you'll see Hank plays ball, proves up and deeds to me all in good time. Hank's afraid of you and you're afraid of me. Fail me in this and I'll squeal about who killed Munson. Get Hank off to file pronto. Oakes'll go with him, to feel out the wind in Lander. You stay at your place, so you can watch out for posses.

Koonts.

With this note Oakes left a few moments later on a fast horse. Koonts figured that everything was working out beautifully, but for the one uncertain factor of Tigheman.

CHAPTER X

ADVENTURES OF TIGHEMAN

ABOUT this time Ex-Captain of Infantry Dick Tigheman was sitting with his back propped against a pine tree on the bank of Mulberry Creek. The spot was well up in the boxed canyon of this stream. Tigheman had just finished bathing and binding a painful wound in his chest.

Shades of night were falling, and the man was weak and weary. More than anything else he wanted to crawl into the brush somewhere and go to sleep. He had no serious doubt but what Caroline Jones was safe at home with Squad One. His judgment told him that the outlaws were not in possession of the basin, or else Charlie would not have attempted to lead them astray up the tributary ravine. In any case Tigheman was afoot and could not efficiently follow the girl. Surely she was safe. For more than an hour Dick had remained with the unconscious Indian, allowing the girl time to reach her friends.

He abused himself for letting the Indian get away. Still, with Shoshone sprawled unconscious on the ground, Tigheman had not felt equal to killing him in cold blood. Besides he had more than half been con-

vinced that Charlie's skull was cracked—that he would never come to in any case. After an hour of watching him, an hour during which Tigheman had been weak almost unto death himself, he had managed to get up and take a look around in the brush for his horse. The only one he had seen was Shoshone's buckskin, some distance down the hollow, and this Tigheman had pursued afoot. But he had failed to catch the buckskin and at last had returned, to find Shoshone Charlie gone.

Naturally he had assumed that the Indian was lurking nearby, to knife him at the first opportunity. Thus Tigheman had made all speed down hollow, at last reaching the cool stream in the main canyon where he had given attention to his wound.

Now, at nightfall, he reclined against a pine tree and considered his next movement. He still possessed his two army automatics, but he realized that he was in no condition for a fight. Recent loss of blood was still making his head swim. He assumed he must be seven or eight miles up canyon from the basin—too long a walk for a man just knifed in the chest, already exhausted to the point of collapse. The thing to do, he decided, was to lose his trail in the creek, then crawl into the brush and go to sleep.

This he proceeded to do. He waded for perhaps a thousand yards downstream, then left the water on the opposite side from the horse trail, climbed well up the slope into a thicket of chinery and prepared to rest.

He had scarcely reached the place when he heard the sounds of a galloping horse, coming up canyon. Spying through the brush upon the trail below, Tigheman saw a rider gallop by, disappearing uptrail. In the momentary glimpse which Tigheman caught of the man, he could only distinguish that he was not a member of Squad One. He was a rough-dressed fellow with bewhiskered face riding swiftly from the basin—nothing more could Dick tell about him. Friend, enemy or neutral he might be. Tigheman began guessing at the time and figured that more than three hours had elapsed since Caroline Jones had left on her race to the basin. She should have arrived at the log house in plenty of time to have avoided encounter with the man who had just passed by.

Nevertheless Tigheman, thinking of this chance, began wishing that he had held the man up at the point of one of automatics. If the fellow were friendly, no harm would have been done. If an enemy, so much the better, for he could either have reduced the enemy by one, or could have forced the man to give vital information and then commandeered his horse.

Little did he realize what a wealth of informatory evidence he would have received, had he held up the passing rider. Even had he refused to talk, Tigheman would have found an interesting note on him, signed by Koonts and addressed to Mayme Suggs.

Nevertheless he realized that he had overlooked a bet, and he resolved to hold up the very next two-legged being who might pass his way. All was fair in love and war. Shoshone Charley's perfidy was indicative that a war was going on, somewhere, and Tigheman was almost ready to admit that he was in love with Caroline.

All the while his anxiety for the girl's safety became more acute. Safe for the moment she probably was, he conceded, safe with Squad One, yet all the same he sensed an ominous menace in the air. He thought of another proof that Shoshone Charley had led them astray. Charlie had spoken of a rock slide down canyon, had claimed that the canyon passage was blocked. Yet here had come this rider of the dusk, galloping swiftly up the main gorge! His passage gave the lie to the rock-slide story.

MULLING over these things, weariness conquered Tigheman and he fell asleep. For nine hours he lay there in the chinery, dead to the world, and dawn was just peeping over the rimrocks when he awoke.

He was hungry. By a stroke of luck he saw a rock squirrel running along a ledge just above him; taking careful aim with one of his automatics he bagged the animal. With this he made an unsalted breakfast, barbecuing it over a twig fire. Afterward he felt a good deal stronger and de-

cided to move on afoot to the basin.

Caution, however, impelled him not to take the canyon trail. Very likely Shoshone Charlie would have warned the outlaws of his presence in the mountains, and men might be searching for him along the main trail. Above him he saw a niche by which he could crawl upward out of the gorge and attain whatever plateau lay above. Up this niche he made his way. It was hard going, and he had to rest frequently. Yet in less than an hour he reached a timbered plateau whose elevation he guessed to be a thousand feet higher than that of the canyon bed.

Going was level now, and Tigheman made good time. Walking briskly through the cool upland woods, he kept a direction approximately parallel to that of the canyon, and knew that sooner or later he would arrive at the brink of the basin's rimrock.

He came to it sooner than he expected. The sun was no more than an hour high when suddenly he arrived at a veritable jumping off place, the brink of a sheer rimrock which overlooked a deep wide crater in the mountains. There Dick Tigheman had his first sight of Eagle Nest Basin.

Identification was easy, for the great round arena which lay below him fulfilled in detail the description of Earl Wooten. Sloping down from the rimrocks lay a long steep bank of evergreens; circled by the evergreens, and in the palm of the arena below, was an inviting plain of open lush grass. And in the middle of this grassy bottom was a single house of logs.

Even at the distance Tigheman could distinguish smoke emerging from the house's chimney, which was a certain indication of its occupancy. By whom? Squad One? Tigheman hoped so. Then he saw that horses were grazing near the house, a few of them tied to a hitch rack. These proved nothing, he admitted. For the animals might belong to either outlaws or to Squad One.

He wished that he had his old campaign binoculars so that he might indulge in a little more satisfactory espionage. For instance, he wished he could ascertain the identity of a man whom, a moment ago, he had seen emerge from the distant house. He was no more than a dot to Tigheman; he might or might not be a member of the Wooten-Goff crowd.

Watching, he observed the two-legged dot move to a four-legged dot, a horse. The man mounted and rode from the house, out across the lush toward the encircling fringe of evergreens. He was riding, in fact, almost toward Tigheman himself. Good. Here, observed Tigheman, was one of the tenants of the house approaching on some errand which would bring him closer to view.

Dick moved south along the rimrock three or four hundred yards until the direction of the oncoming rider pointed squarely at him. Then he found a crevice in the precipice and began descending through it to reach the evergreen slope.

He would intercept the oncomer, he decided. If one of old Squad One, well and good. If an enemy, Tigheman meant to profit by his lost opportunity of the evening before. He would hold the man up and see what information might be jolted from him.

Descending through the niche of the rimrock, Tigheman reached the timbered slope. He could see nothing at a distance now, for spruce enclosed him. However, he had noted the direction of the oncomer, had placed himself in line with it; hence he moved directly down the slope with every chance of meeting him.

He had proceeded downward through the spruce for perhaps fifteen minutes when he heard the sound of hooves climbing the hill, far below him. Tigheman waited. He might have to shoot the man, he knew, and the further up the hill the shooting occurred the less chance of its being heard from the house. He took position behind a twenty-four inch tree, his ears following the approach of the climbing horseman.

SOON the horseman, riding at a walk up the slope, came in sight. Tigheman's first appraisal catalogued him as a flashily dressed man with loose, crooked lips, who wore boots but no spurs, who wore a belt but no gun.

The band on his center-creased felt hat matched the gaudy plaid of his tie—all in all he more resembled a racetrack tout than a mountain outlaw. Tigheman realized that Squad One would not be likely to have friendly connection with such a type. The fact that this fellow had just emerged from the log house made it look as though Squad One were not within it. The watcher felt his heart sink, for this meant that Caroline Jones had raced for a house occupied by other than friends. Tigheman drew an automatic, determined to gather the fellow in.

But now he observed that the rider was approaching with peculiar caution. This caution increased with his ascent. Now he stopped, faced his horse down slope, peering down the vista of woods below as though he might suspect, or fear, that someone was following. This puzzled Tigheman. He was puzzled more than ever when the man, having proceeded fifty feet further up the slope, dismounted and began climbing a tree.

Why should he climb a tree? Yet climb a tree he did, and a tall one. From his own ambush Dick could see the fellow in detail now; again he noted that the man wore no side arms, nor was there a rifle on his horse. While this tended to disidentify him as an outlaw, still Tigheman could not believe him to be a friend of his own friends. He watched the man attain a considerable altitude in the tree, and saw that his espionage was directed not to points further up or along the slope, but was directed back toward the lush bottom, along his own recent trail from the log house.

Finally the man descended. He did not remount, but walked afoot, leading his horse still further up the slope. When he paused again he was no more than twenty paces from Dick Tigheman. Again the fellow scanned his back trail carefully. His movements were furtive; more than ever was Tigheman sure that he was some brand of thief. Yet what was there to steal up here in the open woods?

At last the man stopped; his hands became occupied at the base of a spruce, a great snag of half dead spruce, larger in bole than the one which shielded Tigheman. Dick now observed that it was hollow, that there was a rotted aperture at its barkless base; it was within this aperture that the man's hands were groping.

And then suddenly the man jumped as though he had been shot. Tigheman, too, heard the sound—the crackling of a twig off in the woods, from a point about as far to the left of the flashily dressed man as Tigheman was to his right. Looking toward the sound, almost as startled as the groper by the hollow tree, Tigheman saw a squirrel scamper up a sapling, a movement which furnished an explanation of the slight, crackling sound.

Flashy Clothes saw the squirrel, also, and appeared relieved. After listening intently for a moment, and hearing nothing further, he stopped and began groping within the hollow snag again. Tigheman saw him draw a large canvas bag from the bole, and began untying a string which fastened its top. Instantly Dick was convinced that here was some thief who had concealed his own winnings in this tree, and who, untrustful of his fellows, was fearful lest they learn of the cache.

The man unknotted the string which secured the bag. Opening the sack at last he produced money therefrom. Apparently, however, he only wanted part of his treasure. Dick saw him count out a definite number of bills and return the rest, the most of them, to the sack. He was engaged in the operation of retying the sack when Dick Tigheman, watching him, saw beyond and directly in line with him the face of another man, peering from the brush. Like Tigheman himself, he was obviously spying on the fellow kneeling by the hollow snag. Tigheman's hand tightened upon his pistol and quickly he brought it up to cover not Flashy Clothes, but the skulker beyond.

FOR Tigheman instantly knew that copper colored, scar-cheeked, one-eyed visage, peering yonder from the brush. Shoshone Charlie! There indeed was the renegade, Tigheman's own assailant of yesterday, now apparently stalking prey from his own roost.

Yet he noted that the Indian did not at-

tack the other man, but merely spied upon his cache. In a moment the man by the snag finished the knotting of the sack and shoved it back into the hollow. The sheaf of bills which he had withdrawn from it he stuffed in his pocket, as he stood up and took a pace or two toward his horse.

Beyond him in the brush Tigheman could still see the Indian, Charlie. It was plain that Charlie merely wished to locate the other man's cache, and was content to allow him to leave with the small increment withdrawn. If pressed to choose, Tigheman's sympathies would have aligned with Flashy Clothes; Charlie was a known rascal, whereas the other man was as yet of unknown character.

Just at the moment a squirrel, the same squirrel Tigheman had seen a moment ago, began to chatter and scold from a limb. Dick noted that the animal was directly above Shoshone Charlie, that its scoldings were emphatically directed at the Indian's skulking intrusion. Possibly that particular thicket was sacred to the squirrel—perhaps another cache of booty, a horde of last year's piñon nuts, was being trampled by Shoshone's feet. At any rate the squirrel scolded, and Flashy Clothes, obviously on edge at every sound, whirled and scanned the thicket sharply.

"Damn!" Tigheman heard him exclaim. "That damn' one-eyed Indian, huh?" Shoshone's face had disappeared, but Tigheman knew the other man must have glimpsed him.

"Hi! Come outa there, Charlie, I seen yuh; come outa there," the man who resembled a racetrack tout called huskily.

But his talk was that of a man who employed words merely to chase away his own fright, of one who hoped that he really had not seen the vision he nevertheless feared he had seen, who certainly did not desire Charlie to "come outa there." Tigheman saw that the man was scared, as both his chalky face and his next swift movement indicated. For he sprang back to the hollow snag, snatched therefrom the canvas sack and with it made for his horse. Obviously the cache, being discovered, was of no worth now. To leave it would be to lose it, and the man was alertly bent on taking it all with him.

Then from behind a tree, to frustrate such an escape, leaped Shoshone Charlie, wielding the same blade, or one like it, which yesterday had drunk of the blood of Tigheman. He was upon the white man like a catamount; the victim screamed; the Indian's weight bore him to the ground and the knife poised above the white man's throat. Twenty yards away, Dick Tigheman pulled a trigger, firing at Shoshone's viciously purposeful face.

The Indian stiffened, tumbling clear of his victim. Tigheman rushed up, holding a gun on Shoshone, another on the white man who was scrambling to his feet. But Charlie was already dead. And Flash Forbes was as harmless; in a blithering funk he slumped to the ground at Tigheman's feet and blubbered for mercy.

CHAPTER XI

THE SALLISAW SPIDER

SEARCHING the man, Tigheman found him unarmed. He could tell, from his pleadings, that the fellow thought that he, Tigheman, was a Ranger. This was natural on account of the captain's uniform stripped of all insignia, and Tigheman did not bother to undeceive him.

"Sit up and talk," Dick cajoled the grovelling coward. "Give me some true talk, and your horse, and you can skin out of here as far as I'm concerned. Give me the low-down on what's going on. First, what's your name?"

"Forbes," wailed Forbes. "But honest, Mr. Ranger, I ain't no outlaw. Lemme go. I ain't done nothin'."

Tigheman grasped his collar and shook him.

"Listen; you can go if you talk true talk, and convince me it's true talk; otherwise not. Who's down there in the log house?"

"You mean if I'll tell you the truth you'll let me go?" asked Forbes incredulously.

"Yep, the whole truth and nothing but," reaffirmed Tigheman. "Answer every question truthfully, and give me your horse, and you can walk off, money

and all. I'm not afraid you'll go back to Koonts. Not after this run-in with Shoshone. Koonts sent Shoshone here to spy out your cache, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did, damn him," exploded Forbes. "He knew I was comin' here, because I had to get two hundred dollars for him on a little deal. He sent the Indian to follow me and find out where I kept the money. But I accidentally seen the Indian, so of course he had to jump me. I'd 'a' been a dead man if you hadn't shot him, mister—and say, much obliged for doin' it. *Tambien* I'd be a dead man if I showed up back at Koonts' place."

"Is Koonts in the log house?"

"Yep."

"Since when?"

"Since late yesterday afternoon, when we smoked out seven homesteaders."

"Did any of these homesteaders get killed?"

"No; he's got 'em locked up."

"What about a girl who rode into the basin late yesterday?"

"She's at the house."

Tigheman's face darkened; his fingers dug deeply into the shoulders of Flash Forbes.

"Is she being treated right?" he asked.

"Yep," assented Forbes, looking away from Tigheman guiltily.

He flinched under the pressure on his shoulders, and his tongue licked in a circle around on his crooked, loose lips.

"What does Koonts aim to do with her?" demanded Tigheman.

"Send her away, over to Pocatello, Idaho."

"Who with?"

As the quizzing took this turn, Flash Forbes became more and more nervous, his eyes watered and looked everywhere but into Tigheman's; altogether his manner was that of a dog caught killing lambs. Dick had to repeat the question and prod him with a gun.

"Me—I was the one who was gonna take her," he admitted. "Someone had to —and well, dammit, I was stuck on the girl, honest I was, Mr. Ranger. I swear I didn't mean her no harm. Dode Birch did, likely; and he's a hell spawn if there ever was one, he is. So I horned in, offered to take her myself. Koonts, the damn' grafter, he saw a chanct to make a rakeoff, like he's always doin'; so he offered to let the highest bidder take the girl. I see it all now. He knew I'd bid the highest, 'cause I'm the only man in the bunch who ever saved anything. He knew I had a cache of coin somewhere, and he's been tryin' to locate it for years. So he had Shoshone foller me. But it's all off now, Mister. I wouldn't go back to Koonts fer all hell with a gold fence around it. Too bad, too; 'cause I'd have played square with the girl. Now that dirty Dode Birch, he——"

"No, he won't," cut in Tigheman savagely. "Leave Birch to me; and Koonts too. Also you can leave your horse with me, skin up over the rim and never show around the basin again. Yes, you can take your filthy money, too. I think you've told me the truth, for the most part, but still you're a cowardly skunk, Forbes, and I doubt if the girl would have been much safer with you than with Dode Birch. Now beat it."

"You mean I can take my money and go?" asked Forbes, hardly able to believe his luck.

"Yep; I promised you, and I'll keep my word. Get gone, quick."

Flash Forbes picked up his sack and went scurrying off up the hill toward the rimrock. Tigheman mounted the man's horse and rode slowly in the opposite direction, down the slope.

THE only plan he had in mind was to get to the log house, and quickly. Caroline Jones needed him, as did his comrades of Squad One. However desperate the hazard, Tigheman meant to take it and beard Koonts in his own den.

Still he realized that he owed it to Caroline, and to Squad One, to make his efforts toward rescue as sanely efficient as possible. A dead man could not help them. And Dick knew very well that if he went galloping straight across the open lush toward the house, armed only with pistols and dressed in army clothes, a score of men would begin cutting down on him

long before he reached the house. He would be a riddled corpse before ever a chance came to even rebuke Koonts. To do any good he had to mix brains with boldness. He must outthink Koonts as well as outfight him. And he must do it without delay—no time to make a fifty mile ride to Lander and petition help from Sheriff Hicks.

First of all, he decided, he must get rid of his infernal captain's uniform. That was the one thing which would immediately, and from a distance, identify him as an enemy to Koonts. On the other hand it was in his favor that not a one of the gang had ever seen him, except Forbes and Shoshone. Forbes was gone and Shoshone was dead. All Koonts could know about Tigheman was what the Indian might have told him; probably he had been described as a man who wore a uniform and automatic guns.

And very likely, thought Tigheman, Koonts had scouts out right now looking for such a man. Seeing such a one, they would of course shoot on sight.

As he was brooding over this situation Tigheman came to a path, a side-hill woods path; it led, not up or down, but along the contour of the slope, obviously leading to some common point of travel.

As he did not want to go further down the slope and thus emerge from the timber until he had formed some definite plan, he turned to the right along this path. Before he had gone a hundred yards he saw something beside it, on the ground, which, although it gave him a feeling of revulsion, nevertheless immediately suggested a solution for one of his difficulties. He saw a dead man lying face down on the ground. He was a big fellow, and Tigheman saw that he had died a death of violence, had been shot through the body and through the head. In his hand was clutched a bone-handled six-gun, indicating that the man himself had been in hostile pose when shot.

Mastering the distaste which the act afforded him, Tigheman set to work to strip the dead man of his corduroy pants, the boots, the belt and the bone-handled gun. Although he as yet had no exact scheme of procedure, he was sure that he could lose nothing by exchanging army garb for outlaw garb, and might gain much. From one thing he could, appearing from a distance like an ordinary rangeman, at least get a good deal closer to the log house before being shot down. He might even gain admittance to the house, jam a gun against the spine of Koonts and hold his life as hostage for those of his friends.

Or better still, he might not only get into the house but remain there, masquerading as a fugitive outlaw, and——

"Wow!" exclaimed Tigheman, as a certain bold idea began to unfold in his mind. He had just finished his ghoulish job of stripping the pants, boots, hat, belt and gun from the corpse of Montana Mike Mitchell. "Wow! And why not? Koonts never saw him. And they say his hangout is a regular hole-in-the-wall hideout for transient crooks. Suppose I can work myself off for one of these! Koonts'll be waiting for Forbes to show up with two hundred dollars, the sum he had counted out of the sack, which was to be Koonts' rakeoff for the delivery of Caroline Jones. Also he'll be waiting for Shoshone to show up, with information as to where Forbes keeps his main bankroll. Neither will come. Then Koonts will assume Charlie murdered Forbes and made away with the entire cache. That will leave the deal where she started. Dode Birch will pipe up and claim privilege of taking the girl away. Then I'll step up and outbid Birch——"

But would he? Tigheman thought of certain flaws in his scheme. He abused himself for having let Forbes go; at least he should have touched Forbes for a certain part of his ill-got fortune. For Tigheman did not have two hundred dollars, or even one hundred, on him. He was not equipped with the wherewithal to outbid Birch for the custody of Caroline Jones.

Going through the pockets of his newly acquired corduroys, he found only a dollar and eighty cents, some bullets and a tobacco sack. He began to see, too, other flaws in his strategy. What about this outfit of clothes? Probably the dead man had been a Koonts gangster, and his garments would be recognized by Koonts. Then there was the horse, which had belonged to Forbes. Koonts would know that, too.

Considering now these unfortunate properties of his rôle, Tigheman's enthusiasm for his plan began to fade. He conceded that probably the only good his outfit would do him would be merely to allow him to pass inspection on first sight, might not give him away until he could get within the house.

NEVERTHELESS he accoutered himself in the trappings he had acquired, and hid his army togs and his automatics beneath an old log. Then he mounted the horse and continued along the side-hill trail, trying to think of some correction which would plug up the wide open holes in his strategy.

Puzzling as he rode along, his hand stroked his jaw. The bristly touch reminded him that he had not shaved for nearly three days, since just before arriving at Lander aboard the C. and N. W. Pullman. His beard was naturally of quick growth and he had an idea that, what with scratches from brush and the marks of his fight with Shoshone Charlie, he presented a fairly tough looking physiognomy. So much the better; the rougher he looked the more presentable he would consider himself in the eyes of Koonts.

Suddenly the path he followed changed in character; it began to descend slightly and Dick heard the gurglings of riffled water. He was thirsty, so he hurried on for a drink. In a moment he came to a clear creek at the very point where the walls of its gorge fell away, the portal of a boxed canyon where the stream entered Eagle Nest Basin. He knew the stream must be Mulberry Creek. On its bank he saw a wider trail. This, he was certain, was the main inlet to the basin, the one Caroline Jones had used yesterday on the last lap of her ill-fated journey.

Tigheman drank of the stream, lying belly down on the gravel. He noted his reflection in the water, and grinned as he observed the roughness of his general aspect. He reflected that he not only resembled a fugitive outlaw, but one who might have been hunted through brush by sheriffs and hounds.

He had just finished drinking and was sitting up when he heard the sounds of an approaching horse. Some one was coming, galloping down Mulberry Canyon, heading for the basin. Tigheman thought very likely it might be the same man he had seen the evening before, returning from whatever errand had taken him up-canyon. He drew the bone-handled gun, deciding to hold this fellow up and look him over.

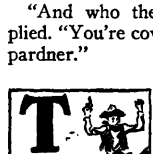
With this in mind, he screened himself behind some brush, and waited. Soon the rider came into view, swinging along on a big blue roan. This was not the horse Tigheman had glimpsed the evening before. Nor was the rider the same man. He might or might not be an outlaw, but Tigheman decided that he had better throw down on him anyway. Or had be better let him pass? He was debating the issue in his mind when the fellow drew his mount to an abrupt halt. Out came his gun, and Dick saw that he was staring at some object across the trail. It was Tigheman's own horse which drew the man's attention, the horse which had been the property of Flash Forbes. Tigheman, in coming forward for a drink, had failed to leave the beast properly screened in the brush.

Obviously the new arrival was of a suspicious, as well as alert, nature.

"Hey, there; who are you?" he called out. He was looking, not in the direction of Tigheman, but in the direction of the riderless horse, across the trail.

From his own position Tigheman drew bead on the man's torso.

"And who the hell are you?" he replied. "You're covered. Elevate your mitts, pardner."



THE man whirled toward Tigheman, but his hands, gun and all, elevated slightly. Tigheman stepped out, holding his bone-handled mechanism of death at the aim.

"Higher, feller," he ordered, motioning at the other's hands.

Something about the appearance of Tigheman seemed to reassure the newcomer.

"Oh," he growled; "are you one of Koonts' men?"

"Unh huh," assented Tigheman, taking the cue quickly, for better or for worse.

"'S all right, then," grinned the man on the roan. A considerable relief had overspread his face. "I was lookin' fer Koonts. Are you the outpost? Denver Joe said I might get held up and quizzed, to see if I was safe."

Tigheman quickly guessed at the man's caste and errand.

"Yep, I'm the outpost," he answered. "But I ain't never seen you before. How do I know you're safe? You know Koonts?"

"No; but I got a knock-down from Denver Joe. I'm O. K."

"Let's see it," barked Tigheman. "And watch yer paws, feller. I got orders to shoot any guy what ain't safe, y'understand."

"Oh, I'm all right," grinned the other; "and I'll prove it."

Assuredly he put his left hand to pocket and came forth with a paper. Tigheman snatched it, observing that it was a pencilled note. He read:

Louie:

this will introduse the Sallisaw Spider. he hales from Oklihomy and one of the slickest you want to know anywheres. He does banks and espress companys mostly he wants to lay low around your place awhile treat him right

Denver Joe.

As he read this, Tigheman's heart began to thump with a warm elation, for here was the exact property he needed to piece out his own strategy. Here into his hands was delivered the Sallisaw Spider, unknown to Koonts, and yet highly recommended by one of Koonts' friends.

"All right; throw that gun over on the grass," he ordered suddenly.

The Sallisaw Spider was both amazed and hurt. "What d'yuh mean?" he demanded peevishly. "Yuh think that note from Joe is phoney?"

"No, I think it's genuine," replied Tigheman evenly. "And I think those saddle bags of yours have got some genuine loot in them, too. Altogether, Mr. Sallisaw Spider, you impress me as a genuine fugitive outlaw, with plenty of stolen money, an A-one makeup and a hard-rode horse. Which is just what I'm looking for. I never saw Koonts myself. But I'm going to see him, in about thirty minutes, claiming I'm the Sallisaw Spider and proving it by Denver Joe."

"Damn!" yelled the Oklahoma bandit, his face going blue black with rage. "Yuh think you can pull that on me, yuh——"

Down came his gun, like a flailing rocket, belching flame and smoke. A bullet scorched Tigheman's cheek and he pulled his own trigger. He dropped to his knees as he shot again, his hat—the battered old felt of Montana Mike Mitchell—taking the Spider's second slug. Then the smoke cleared. The Spider drooped in his saddle, then slipped to the ground, dead.

Tigheman concealed his body in the brush. He unsaddled the horse of Forbes and turned the brute loose. Then for the second time in an hour he traded clothes with a corpse.

True to his suspicions, he found the saddle bags choked with loot, mostly notes of tender issued by banks of Eastern Oklahoma. It was convincing stuff to go with the letter from Denver Joe. Tigheman mounted the big roan. With all the paraphernalia of the Sallisaw Spider he rode into Eagle Nest Basin, to confront Koonts as a thief among thieves, and to bid for Caroline Jones.

CHAPTER XII

DYNAMITE!

EX-CORPORAL GOFF and his six comrades in misery were still confined in the dugout. Every bone of their long six-foot bodies ached with excruciating pains; the cords cut like heated wires into their wrists and ankles. Almost worse than this, the closeness of the quarters had become stifling.

Only such insignificant ventilation

came to them as was admitted through the cracks of the oblique door over the steps. This door was padlocked, they knew, and guarded by a sentry. Yet there were cracks in the rudely made door, and one of these was about a quarter of an inch wide, admitting, in daytime, just the thinnest wedge of light. It was hardly enough to allow the members of Squad One to distinguish one another, there in the cave. About all it was good for was to inform them the direction of the outlet, and to furnish just sufficient ventilation to keep them from smothering.

"Are you fellers dead yet?" asked Zeke Fleming, without guile, and genuinely seeking information.

"When do we eat, if ever?" came the voice of Hogan from the far corner.

"Anybody been playin' with the snake lately?" asked Wooten.

No one bothered to answer any one else's questions. Goff himself was wearily trying to think—to think about Captain Tigheman and the girl, Hubert Jones' sister, who had stumbled in upon them at the very instant of their defeat. What about them? Was Tigheman, too, in the hands of Koonts? And what was Squad One going to do about it? Were they going to lay there in this hole and die, without raising a hand to help Tigheman and Miss Jones?

"If I had some Bull Durham and some papers," he heard Conroy whine, "I'd smoke a pill; that is if I had a match and my hands weren't tied."

"I got some Durham," offered Wooten.

"I got the papers," piped Bud McCune.

"I got the habit," mocked Fleming. "Now if we jest had a match and our hands weren't tied, we'd be fixed."

All this folderol set Goff's mind on a new track. Matches! Tied hands! He, Goff, had a box of matches in his pocket. His idea crystallized.

"Stam, I'm gonna wiggle around until my left pants pocket gets against your hands," he said, rolling over closer to Stamford. "Turn your back to me."

Stamford turned his back to Goff. His hands were tied behind him and he could not separate them, but his fingers were free to grope.

"Feel around until you get a finger in my pocket, Stam," instructed Goff. "Rake out a box of matches, then light one, and hold it to the strings on my wrist. Keep on lighting matches, until you've burned the string in two."

"Burn the string in two?" exclaimed Stamford. "I can't see anything. More likely to burn your hand off."

"Let her burn," insisted Goff. "I was a fat-head for not thinking of it before. You can feel my wrists, can't you?"

The two men were lying back to back, Stamford groping with his unguided fingers at the other's bound wrists.

"Buckskin, that cord is, Goff," he announced. "It would take a lot of burning."

"Shoot," ordered Goff doggedly. "No matches in that pocket? All right. Try the other."

"Corp," whispered Bud McCune. "That's a darb of a idea, but it's gonna be kinda tough on you. Say, let Stam burn my hands; I'm only a buck private."

"I got hold of a matchbox," announced Stamford.

"Shoot," repeated Goff.

Two or three others of the men offered to substitute for Goff. Everyone realized that a good many matches would have to be spent, entailing a good deal of blind fumbling with flames against flesh, before a buckskin knot could be burned in two. But the ex-corporal stood pat. It was his scheme, he insisted, and he was not going to let anyone else steal his stuff.

Fortunately the matchbox was one of those common penny staples which are sandpapered on the sides. This gave Stamford something to strike on. A tiny flicker of light appeared in the groove between his back and Goff's. Goff gritted his teeth as flame bit his wrist.

MATCH after match Stamford struck. Not a sound came from Goff, although the rest knew he must be suffering a hellish torment. Outside they could hear a pair of Koonts' men talking, as they lounged upon the oblique door of the dugout. Stamford was afraid that they might hear the

scratchings of his matches, or, looking down through the cracks between boards, see the faint illuminations of the lucifers.

But apparently they did not, and Stamford kept at it, sparing Goff as much as possible. Clumsy as his stance was, he knew he was making headway for he could smell the scorched buckskin.

At last Goff gave a mighty wrench and his hands came free. He sat up, and immediately began working with his seared fingers at the bindings of his own ankles. From then on the emancipation proceeded swiftly. Goff, free at last to stand and move about in the gloomy cave, lost no time in releasing the other six men. Twenty minutes after the first conception of the match idea every man of Squad One stood on his feet.

This they were just barely able to do, and remain erect, for the earth covered pole roof was no higher than their own height. Their bare heads scraped it. Laterally, also, the quarters were cramped, being only about nine feet square. But Squad One was so stiff and sore that the men could hardly move, in any case. Hunger was sharp. Since yesterday they had been confined without food.

"I could eat a commissary mule," announced McCune.

"Yep, raw and tail first," agreed Conroy.

"I guess they figger on shootin' us right away, so why waste food?" Fleming said.

Goff's active mind was already busy on new plans.

"Talk easy, boys, and don't make any unnecessary noise," he remarked, taking up Fleming's theme. "I figger someone'll be down here pretty soon, either to feed us or take us out to be shot. Not so bad, now we're standin' flatfooted on our number tens. Stam, give me what's left of those matches. When I strike one, everybody look around for something to hit with. Whoever comes down those steps first, for whatever purpose, we bean him over the cocoanut and grab his guns."

There were whispered murmurs of applause at Goff's second constructive idea. As the match flared everyone dropped to hands and knees and began searching the floor of the dugout.

The match went out.

"Find anything?" questioned Goff.

Only Hogan had seen anything which might be used for a club.

"Not on the floor," whispered Hogan. "But I thought I saw a peg sticking out of the rear wall."

Goff struck another match and Hogan refound the peg, and laid hold of it. He yanked, and the thing came out of the dirt wall of the cellar. It proved to be an admirable substitute for a black-jack, in fact it improved on one, being a short length of two-inch lead pipe, probably put there by the outlaws to hang a sack of meat on in times when the dugout had been used as a hot weather provision cellar.

Hogan handed it to Goff, who hefted it.

"Made to order," he announced. "First man to come down here gets this on his dome."

"Good," grunted Buck Conroy, who was probably the most athletic in build of Squad One. "But let me swing it, Corp," went on Buck. "I'll guarantee whoever I swat with it will take the count. And say, take my shirt and wrap your wrists up; I'll bet they're burnin' fit to kill."

The lantern-jawed Texan stripped off his flannel shirt, tore it into segments and handed ribbons of it to Goff. In the dark no one could see how drawn and anguished Goff's face was. He handed Conroy the pipe and began wrapping his own burned wrists.

The Texan, clubbing the cylinder of lead, moved to the foot of the steps and stood vigil.

"Remember," cautioned Goff, "when Buck knocks him out, somebody grab his guns. We'll make somebody pay for this party before we're through."

LESS than half an hour later they heard Koonts himself approach the two men lounged above on the oblique door.

"Shultz," they heard Koonts say, "we ain't heard nothin' yet from that feller Tigheman. I guess we'll keep these birds on ice until we're sure about Tigheman. If Tigheman rounds up the whole State of Wyoming and comes after us, it won't hurt to have something to trade with. Shultz, go

tell Jakie to give you a bag of biscuits and a can of coffee and take it down to those fellers."

Koonts turned away. One man remained seated on the slanting door and Shultz moved to the house, obviously to obey Koonts.

"Poor Shultz; here's where he gets his," murmured Conroy, as he took an aggressive stance to one side of the foot of the steps.

"Kind of a dirty trick, ain't it?" suggested Bud McCune. "Him bringing us grub and Buck crackin' down on him with a lead pipe. But I'll stand on the other side of the steps so I can grab that can of coffee before it spills."

"And don't forget to grab his guns, too," reminded Goff. "I noticed most of those fellers wear two of 'em. Yep, Bud, it does kinda look like a dirty trick, but we got more'n our own hides to worry about. There's Hube Jones' sister, remember. And Tigheman likely needs help, too. Dirtiest trick we could pull would be to quit 'em. Crack down on this Shultz bird, Buck."

"You know me," agreed Conroy, squaring himself for business. "I'll——"

But he checked his speech for he heard someone rattling the padlock on the door at the top of the steps.

"Everybody lay down flat except Buck and Bud," whispered Goff. "We got to give a imitation of bein' hog-tied. When we hear Buck crack down, we roll over quick, to get out of line with the door. Otherwise somethin' sudden might happen to us."

FIVE men threw themselves prone to the floor, to give an imitation of the condition of helplessness the outlaws supposed them to be in. Conroy and McCune alone remained standing, one on either side of the steps and obscured behind the angles of the wall. Above them, the oblique door was thrown up and open. To Squad One it seemed that the dugout was flooded with light. That was because their eyes had become accustomed to the dark. Actually the cave was quite gloomy, especially so to the man Shultz who now began to descend the steps, bag of biscuits in one hand, can of coffee in the other.

He failed to see either Conroy or McCune, obscured as they were by the angles of the wall. Dimly he could see the prone forms of men lying face down on the cellar's floor. His feet reached the lowest step and then touched the earthen bottom of the cave. Crack! Down came Conroy's two-foot length of two-inch lead pipe. It struck squarely on the skull of Shultz and he pitched forward, the can of coffee flying from his hand.

But Bud grabbed it, catching it before it hit the floor and spilling less than a pint. There was no outcry. Just two thudding sounds—the pipe hitting Shultz and Shultz hitting the floor.

The five members of Squad One who were prone quickly rolled over to one or the other of the side walls, to get out of line with the steps.

And just in time. From the top of the steps a gun barked six times. Six slugs rained lead down the steps and into the dugout, as the outlaw whom Shultz had left above, having heard the thuds, emptied his gun.

Conroy stooped and snatched a belt, holstered with two .45s, from Shultz. As he did so McCune was very carefully and tenderly setting the can of coffee in one of the cave's forward corners, where it was safe from being kicked over.

They heard a dozen men coming at a run from the log house.

"What's all the shootin' for, Skinny?" the voice of Koonts bellowed.

"Them jaspers down there are plumb loose and on the prod," explained Skinny. "They slammed Shultz with a club, so I turned loose a few bullets."

"Hell yuh say!" exclaimed Koonts. "Did yuh plug any of 'em, Skinny?"

Skinny peered cautiously down the steps.

"Don't see nothin'," he reported. A moment later, as his eyes became slightly accustomed to the gloom below, he added, "Yes, I see Shultz, and he ain't movin'. He's layin' there with nary gun on him. Ten to one he won't never need one, either. I guessed he's croaked."

However, the members of Squad One, crouching out of line with the steps, heard a faint groan from Shultz and knew he

was not dead. McCune passed one of the two .45s to Fleming.

"Be ready if they rush us, Zeke," he whispered. "And whatever you do don't kick that can of coffee over."

"Reckon we'll have to go down and snake 'em out," the voice of Koonts bawled, at the head of the steps. "And we won't fool with 'em any longer, neither. Schofield was right. We'd orter have lined 'em up in a row and shot 'em yesterday."

Then there followed an interval of silence from above.

"Well, go down and snake 'em out, fellers," Koonts bawled again.

Ten seconds more of silence, broken by the colorless voice of one of the gangsters.

"Aw right; you go first, Koonts," he suggested.

"Huh?" barked Koonts.

"You go first," repeated the other man. "That is if you want to get your head blowed off. We'd have ter go down them narrow steps single file, y'understand. And don't forgit them jaspers is squeezing down on two guns."

Koonts saw the point, and the thought sobered him.

"That's right, they got Shultz's guns, and it wouldn't be right healthy to go bustin' down there single file," he admitted after pondering on it for some minutes. "But they's plenty of other ways to snake 'em out, and no chances took. Schofield, you go and look in the tool chest—that old box Miner George left here last summer—and bring me a coupla sticks of dynamite."

CHAPTER XIII

BURIED ALIVE

DOWN in the hole Squad One heard the order, which came as a complete surprise. Goff's guess had been fire or smoke, but he had not thought of dynamite. As to a hand-to-hand gunfight, that would have been almost too much to hope for. Attackers filing down the narrow steps, approaching from light to gloom, would have been easy marks for the guns of McCune and Fleming, for the club of Conroy, to say nothing of fists, feet and claws of four other husky defenders. But dynamite!

"If they throw a stick down," whispered Hogan to Goff, "grab it and toss it back at 'em, like you did those grenades that time."

In the interval of waiting while Schofield went for the explosives, Goff considered the advice. In a moment he discarded it, substituting another plan. He reasoned that he would probably do no great damage among the outlaws if he caught a stick of dynamite hurled with sputtering fuse into the hole, and threw it back out, because Koonts and his crowd could see the thing boomeranging back and have all the world to dodge in. So Goff elected to combat the maneuver with a slightly more dangerous procedure.

Dialogue above indicated the return of Schofield.

"Did yuh git any caps and fuses?" Koonts was heard to ask.

"Uh huh," answered Schofield. "Here's the stuff; if that don't blow 'em to hell nothin' will."

"Hey, down there," bawled Koonts. "I give you fellers one minute by the clock to lay down your guns and walk out. Time starts now. If yuh don't come, I'll blow yuh out with dynamite."

"Fer God's sake, don't shoot, Koonts! I'm comin'!" During the last moments Squad One had almost forgotten about Shultz, who shared occupancy with them. Now they saw him scramble to his feet and dive for the steps.

Conroy could have stopped him if he had thought quickly enough. But he let his one second of opportunity pass, and Shultz was half-way up the steps, out of his reach.

"Let him go," said Goff. "Koonts would throw that dynamite down just as quick with him here as not."

"We'd orter held him anyway," complained Fleming.

"Too late now," answered Goff.

Indeed Shultz, terrified by the threat of Koonts, was safely among his fellow outlaws at the top of the steps.

"The minute's half gone," reminded Koonts, addressing Squad One.

No answer from below. Goff and his friends knew very well that they had nothing to gain by walking out. They would only be lined up against a wall and shot. So the minute of grace passed.

Then they heard the ominous striking of a match. They knew that Koonts must have capped and fused the stick of dynamite and was now lighting the fuse.

Down the stair well the bomb came sputtering. Goff, with a good deal more to think about now than his blistered wrists, caught the explosive in midair as it flew into the dugout. Instead of throwing it back, as Hogan had advised, and as his last year's training in the trenches of France might have indicated, he retained the dynamite in his grasp, brought the sputtering fuse to his mouth, biting its tip off with his teeth. The sputter ceased, Goff calmly put the dynamite in his hip pocket and waited for another bomb.

Outside, the Koonts crowd, having dodged back a little ways expecting the dugout's roof to be blown off, also waited. Their wait was seasoned with considerable suspense, which heightened rather than diminished as the anticipated explosion failed to reach their ears.

"I guess that was a bum cap. I'll try another," Koonts growled, at last.

Again came the ominous striking of a match. Again a sputtering brown cylinder came flying down the stair well, and again Goff reached out and caught it deftly. Again he bit the tip from the sputtering fuse, heeling his second hip pocket with an enemy weapon.

This time when the explosion failed to reach the outlaws, Koonts began to suspect what was happening to his makeshift grenades. He realized that he was merely furnishing the prisoners with ammunition.

"Louie, I see someone comin' way out there; he just rid outa the canyon," Schofield spoke up, while Koonts was pondering on what scheme of vengeance to employ next.

"How many?" asked Koonts.

"Just one gazabo all by his lonesome," responded Schofield. "D'yuh reckon it's Forbes comin' back?"

Koonts saw the dot in the distance, and from the color of the horse decided that the rider was not Forbes. He was wondering what could have happened to Forbes—and to Shoshone Charlie. By now Forbes should have been back with two hundred dollars, and the Indian should have returned with information concerning Forbes' main cache.

Koonts snapped his attention back to the prisoners in the dugout.

"Aw right, if they won't come back out they can stay there and rot," he decreed. "Shut and lock the door, Skinny. Cox, fetch a couple of shovels. Then we'll spade about six inches of dirt over the door. What air them fellers can find to breathe after that they're welcome to. Come to think of it, smotherin' them is about the cheapest way I know to git shed of 'em, and fer keeps. And who could blame me? I offered to let 'em come out, didn't I? All right, Skinny, let's git this chore done before that rider shows up, seein' as we ain't exactly sure who he is."

The door was closed with a bang. The padlock clicked. Dirt began to thump upon the door's slant. Slowly its cracks were concealed; little by little the dugout was claimed by an absolute and stifling darkness. Squad One was buried alive in a pit nine feet square.

"WHERE do we go from here?" asked Zeke Fleming. He tried to make his tone flip, but it was freighted heavily with despair.

The next speech was from Wooten.

"Didn't I hear some one blow the mess call?" he asked. "Where did yuh set that coffee pot, Bud?"

McCune fumbled around until he found the can of coffee while Wooten, dropping to all fours, rescued the bag of biscuits brought by Shultz.

Then Squad One ate, and drank. The cave was like ink; not a man could see his neighbor, nor the food which was passed fumblingly from one to another. Thus these seven hard-to-kill six-footers broke a fast of a day and a night.

In spite of the pressure of doom upon and around them, it was in the unconquerable nature of these men to pretend to ignore it.

"Save one of the biscuits for the snake, boys," Hogan said.

"That's right," agreed Conroy. "I ain't seen that snake all day; but I hearn him once or twict. Yep; save him a biscuit, Hogan—outa *your* ration."

"Bud ought to get the Crock de Gare fer not lettin' this coffee spill," suggested Fleming. "What do yuh say, Corp?"

But Goff, as usual, was thinking. He was thinking that he might use his two sticks of dynamite to blow away the door and its covering of earth. But to what end? In the first place the explosion might kill them all. In any case the noise would warn every outlaw. To run up the steps and out through the blasted hole would only to be run head-on into a hail of bullets; and if they didn't run out Koonts could soon place more boards and more dirt over the stair well.

Nor would it be any use to try to shoot a hole through the roof, by pouring a concentrated stream of bullets from the two guns. The pole roof of the dugout was covered with a foot or two of earth, and bullets would hardly bore a hole. Besides the smoke of the firing would choke them. And again the noise would warn every outlaw and defeat the purpose.

Yet air they must have, Goff realized. Food was theirs, and drink. Also weapons. But of what good were these without air to breathe? Squad One, in their sealed grave, were quickly inhaling and fouling this air. They were like seven large fish confined to the insufficient waters of a glass bowl. Goff felt for the box of matches delivered him by Stamford, and struck one; it flickered and went out. Already the oxygen was getting scarce.

"Well," remarked Goff finally; "as Fleming says, where do we go from here?"

"I'll try poking a hole through the roof, between poles, with this two inch pipe," suggested Conroy, who had never released grasp of the pipe. "Maybe I can make a periscope."

"Do your stuff, doughboy," answered McCune. "I ain't what you'd call a fresh air fiend, havin' learnt to sleep in one of them Alsace cow barns, but nevertheless I'm sure in the market for ozone, right now."

"Wait till I take off a bootlace, Buck," said Stamford.

The rest of the men did not know why he was taking off a bootlace, but gave him credit for some sane reason. He had one, and explained it as he passed the bootlace to Conroy in the dark. At Stamford's suggestion, Conroy threaded the bootlace through the length of two-inch pipe, tying its ends together on the outside. Goff and the others finally understood the scheme, realizing that it would do no good to poke, a hole through the dirt roof with a pipe, without the string through it, because as the pipe bored its hollow would itself become filled with dirt. But if a hole was bored to outside air and the string pulled, then the dirt within the lead cylinder would be reamed out; the pipe could remain in place as a metal casing for the hole, leaving an uncollapsible two-inch periscope to the outside world.

HOWEVER, the ruse failed. The six-foot Texan, Conroy, punched in the darkness all about on the pole ceiling overhead, but was unable to find a crevice between poles large enough to receive his pipe. At last he broke a sliver from a split pole, inserting the pipe. But again he was balked. The earth above was too solid to give to his punchings. Not only that but he was making an awful lot of thuddings, and Goff was afraid that in time the sentinel or sentinels without would hear.

All the while Goff had been assisting Conroy by lighting matches, yet it became increasingly difficult to keep the matches alight in the rapidly fouling air. It was in one of these momentary flares that Wooten saw the snake.

"Look out, Hogan," he warned. "There's that snake again. He's right between your feet."

Hogan jumped a yard, upsetting Stamford. A faint sound from the position he had vacated indicated that the snake also was on the move. Giving all their ears to this faint sound, the men followed its scuffling, sliding progress along the toe of the east wall. Goff struck another match, holding it closer to the east wall, so that

they might observe the reptile.

The match went out but Wooten had had a good look.

"It's only a bull snake, boys," he announced. "So don't git scared. I'll bet it wants to get out of here as bad as we do."

Which proved to be a fact. Even a snake needs air, and fortunately this one knew where and how to get it. Goff's next match exposed it climbing the east wall, a slightly sloping wall which was rough, having once been plastered with adobe. By sound and by successive flickering lucifers the men of Squad One followed the progress of the snake up the wall.

A final flare exposed only its tail. The reptile's body was gone, and in a moment more the tail disappeared too.

"Don't lose that hole," cried Goff, springing forward. His hand reached out and up, to the angle where the wall met the roof on the east side of the dugout; he held his hand on the spot where the snake had disappeared. His fumbling fingers felt out the hole, the snake hole, no doubt the reptile's alley of egress at such times when the dugout door was shut.

"Bore here with your pipe, Buck," instructed Goff. "Very likely this hole is crooked, but it gives us a start, anyway. Stick your pipe in this hole."

Conroy came forward, extending the pipe while Goff placed its end in the hole. Buck retained grasp of the end where the knot in Stamford's bootlace, threading the cylinder and lapping back on its exterior side, was tied.

In two minutes of twisting and pushing the entire length of the pipe, projecting upward at a sharp angle, was buried. Whether it had reached the outside air or not was unknown to Squad One, for the cylinder was naturally filled with the filings of its own boring.

"Jerk the bootlace, Stam," ordered Goff, striking his next to last match. He knew he could not use another, for if he used his last match the dynamite in his pockets could never be fired. Goff wasn't sure yet how he would use these explosives, yet he knew they spelled power and he resolved to save his last match.

Stamford untied the knot at the pipe's end and pulled. Slowly and stubbornly the string came out of the pipe, reaming the cloggings of its core. The reamed dirt sifted to the floor at the feet of Stamford and when the string was all out there followed—a pencil of light.

Light and air!

And even sound, for now Squad One caught faintly, through this new connection with the universe, a barking speech from Louie Koonts.

"—and you say yore name's Sallisaw Spider, huh? And yuh got a knockdown from Denver Joe? Fork over said knockdown, feller."

There was an interval of silence in which the listeners below judged that some newcomer to camp was passing over his identification.

"Banks and express companies, huh?" they next heard Koonts comment in a slightly more cordial tone. "Business been purty good?"

"Aw, I kin pay my board bill, Koonts, if that's what yuh mean," responded the man addressed. "And I don't aim to bother yuh long, neither. All I want's a rest and a feed and a fresh horse—then I'm headin' for Idaho."

"That blue roan does look purty hard-rid," admitted Koonts.

"Say," went on the newcomer, "when do we eat? Sheriff was on my tail as fur as Laramie and I missed a coupla meals."

"Go right in, Spider," invited Koonts. "Tell Jake, the cook, I said to throw a feed fer yuh."

Conroy pinched Goff. "Did you hear that voice, Goff?" he asked excitedly.

"What voice?" asked Goff.

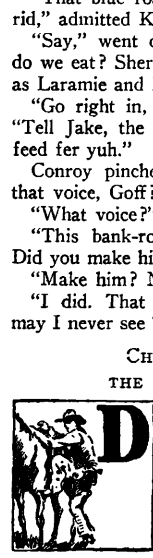
"This bank-robbin' Spider Somebody. Did you make him?"

"Make him? No. What about him?"

"I did. That was Cap Tigheman, or may I never see Texas again."

CHAPTER XIV

THE MASQUERADER



DISMOUNTING from his blue roan gelding, Dick Tigheman, alias the Sallisaw Spider, unsaddled and turned the roan loose. Then he lugged his saddle to the porch. There, before entering to sample the cuisine of Jakie, he

performed an act which was in all respects natural, and yet which he had planned in advance to bait the interest of Koonts.

He opened a pouch which was strapped to the saddle and drew out certain moneys, beyond doubt the loot of recent and successful raids conducted by the real Sallisaw Spider in the State of Oklahoma. Tigheman had not counted the entire sum of the loot, which was mostly in bank notes, but the rolls of currency which he drew from the pouch and stuffed into his pockets were quite impressive. He was aware that the eyes of Koonts, and of a man whom Koonts addressed as Schofield, were bulging. Which suited Tigheman very well.

A dozen other outlaws strolled out and joined Koonts and Schofield in pop-eyed staring at the newcomer's loot.

"Well, I reckon you *have* got enough jack fer yore board bill, Spider, and then some," Koonts commented, grinning.

Tigheman ignored him. Money in pocket, he slouched into the house. There had been method in his show of the money, for his main errand was to substitute himself for Flash Forbes, to engineer his conduct in such manner that he would become elected to escort Caroline Jones to Idaho. Not that he ever meant to go to Idaho with her. But he felt that his first duty was to get her safe, somewhere, and then to take up the rescue of Squad One.

The immediate point was that Tigheman could not bring up the subject of replacing Forbes. To do so would be to instantly magnetize suspicion, for he was not supposed to know anything about either Forbes or Miss Jones. He must lure Koonts into making the suggestion. Koonts would finally tire of awaiting Forbes. Then he would naturally cast about in his mind for someone to replace the gambler, someone who possessed the wherewithal to make a fancy bid.

As he slouched into the house, Tigheman noticed that the man Schofield followed him. At Tigheman's question, Schofield directed the newcomer to the kitchen. But as he passed down a corridor which led to this kitchen, Dick was aware that Schofield was looking after him with an expression akin to suspicion. A few minutes later, as he was eating some beef stew set out by Jakie, Tigheman took a careful stock of his appearance to determine wherein he might be falling down on his rôle. He knew his clothes could draw no suspicion, for they were genuine, the accouterments of the real Sallisaw Spider. Also his face was sufficiently scratched and unkempt to fit the part. He had been careful to keep his jaw stuck out, and his eyes narrowed, with an effort to look mean and dangerous.

Perhaps, he thought, his bearing was too erect and military. He had tried to assume a slouch, but maybe it had not been convincing, at least to Schofield. After eating his stew he started up through the corridor toward the forward part of the house and was careful to round his shoulders and increase the swagger of his slouch. Also he decided to keep a sharp eye on Schofield.

Midway of the corridor leading from kitchen to front room, he passed a door. A sound caught Tigheman's ear which arrested him, causing his muscles to stiffen and his heart to skip a beat. From beyond the door came the unmistakable sounds of weeping, of a woman sobbing in utter and bitter distress. Tigheman knew instantly that he stood before the door of the room where Caroline Jones was held in duress.

His instinct was to try the knob. Of course the door would be locked, yet Tigheman paused there a moment, his ears and heart attuned in sympathy to the sorrow of Caroline. His hand moved out to try the knob. Then suddenly he was aware that Schofield was eyeing him from the portal of the front room. Dick arrested the movement of his hand and slouched forward. Passing Schofield, he went on out upon the porch.

KOONTS and the rest of the gang were there. Tigheman observed that two men were sitting about forty feet apart from the house, on what appeared to be a slight mound of clay. His brief glance did not apprize

him of the fact that this slight yellowish bulge was the covering of a dugout, or exterior cellar, because there was no visible entrance to it. Its slanting door had been covered with a layer of shovelled dirt.

"So Oklahomy's yore range, is it, Spider?" asked Koonts affably. "And did I understand you to say you was bound fer Idaho?"

"Yep, I'm foggin' on West," Tigheman answered carelessly. "Any time I can buy a fresh hoss from yuh, Koonts, I reckon I'll move on. I got a pal over there in Idyho who needs me to swing a job."

"I reckon you're purty good in yore line," suggested a pasty-faced youth who had never risen above calf-stealing. In his sunken eyes and upon his weak, characterless face there was a glow akin to hero worship as he gazed upon the Sallisaw Spider.

Dick's only reply was a contemptuous grunt. Taking out a knife he began to whittle shavings from a stick. He was waiting for Koonts to take the bait about his wishing to buy a horse.

Koonts did.

"Fresh hoss, you say, Spider? Well, I reckon I've got just the hoss you want. It's a Arab racer, five-year old, what ain't been rid fer a month. It cost me real money, that hoss did. It'd take yore roan and a hundred bucks to interest me any at all."

Tigheman yawned.

"What's a hunderd dollars to me?" he remarked lazily. "Lessee that racer and if he's the goods you've made a trade, Koonts. Onless I hang around here long enough for my roan to rest up; in that case I won't need no new hoss."

He was taking care to offer Koonts every possible means of making capital out of his departure. At the very outset he had named his destination, Idaho, the same point of compass toward which Forbes had been scheduled to leave with Caroline Jones.

All the while he was keenly worried over the fate of Squad One. He more than half suspected that he was too late, that they had already been shot. At any rate he realized that he would jeopardize his entire scheme of rescue if he started asking questions about the Wooten-Goff crowd. The very best he could hope to do would be to get the girl safe, then return and use his gun and wits to save Squad One.

"Birch," Koonts was saying to a squat, pock-marked man, "you go round up that sorrel racer and let the Spider throw his glims on him. He's cheap at the price."

Birch went over to the hitch rack, mounted a horse and rode away toward a cavvy grazing not far out in the lush. Tigheman remained seated with his back against a porch post, whittling on a stick. Out of the corner of his eye he was watching Schofield, whose grin of insolent suspicion had never once abated. For some reason Schofield alone of all the bandits appeared to doubt the identity of the guest who called himself the Sallisaw Spider.

The thing began getting on Tigheman's nerves. He was hoping to get away with Caroline without a fight, but he was now increasingly aware that Schofield meant to start something. He decided that his best defense was to keep himself in character. What would the real Spider do in such a case? Tigheman guessed what his conduct would be, and undertook such conduct himself.

"See anything green, feller?" he snarled, sticking out his jaw toward the insolently staring Schofield.

Schofield appeared somewhat taken aback at the sudden boldness of his attack.

"Green?" he answered, haltingly. "Whatcha mean, green? What's bitin' you?"

Tigheman stood up. With his jaw out and a hand on the butt of the real Spider's gun he advanced belligerently on Schofield.

"Yuh been starin' at me ever since I showed up like yuh mought think I was some damn' sneak of a spy, or somethin'. If yuh do, talk up and shoot up, feller."

It was a stiff bluff, as all bluffs are which work; Tigheman's back was to Koonts, in itself an eloquent proof to Koonts that the latest guest must be absolutely O. K. in every sense. Schofield

backed down, his voice taking on a whine.

"I ain't meanin' no harm, Spider," he protested. "Honest I ain't. Gee, but you git on yore ear quick, don't yuh?"

Tigheman turned his back scornfully and resumed his seat.

"Spider's all right, boys, even if he does go on the prod easy," Koonts said. "He's got a knockdown from Denver Joe."

SCHOFIELD relapsed into sullenness. At the first opportunity he slipped within the house. He went on to the kitchen where he found a man named Seven-up Cox who was rustling a handout from Jakie.

In order to get Cox out of the cook's hearing, Schofield led him a few paces up into the corridor which connected the fore and aft quarters of the house.

"Say, Cox," said Schofield, "I got a hunch this new feller ain't all he claims he is. But he's got a chip on his shoulder so go careful. It's up to you; I done tipped my hand and all the talk I could make now 'd be gun talk. But you stroll out on the porch and ast Spider how he left Denver Joe. I'll be right there to back yuh up."

"Denver Joe?" exclaimed Cox. "Why do I ast him how he left Denver Joe?"

"It's this way," explained Schofield. "This guy claims he come through Laramie with a flock of sheriffs on his tail. Now I happen to know Denver Joe opened up a game in Casper, three months ago, and been there ever since. How did this Spider see Joe in Casper, if he come through Laramie?"

Cox studied this point a moment.

"That all yuh got on him?" he asked.

"That and the way he carried himself when he first come into the house. From the chin up he looked more like a Ranger than anything else I seen lately, except he mought a missed a coupla shaves and a feed or so. You stroll out there and ast, casual like, how he left Denver Joe. If he says he left him in Denver, or Laramie, just kid him along while I git a word with Koonts. Koonts is plumb sold on him, the way it stands now, so go slow until I put him wise to the real dope."

"Aw right," agreed Seven-up Cox. "Say, didn't I hear something?"

"Nothin' but that gal Louie's got locked in this room here," answered Schofield. "She's been blubberin' all day."

The two outlaws passed on up the corridor to the front, from there stepping out on the porch to quiz the Sallisaw Spider about Denver Joe.

Dode Birch was leading up a sorrel horse of unusually attractive lines for the Spider's inspection.

"Not so bad, Koonts; although he ain't got nothin' on my roan when he's fresh," Spider was saying. "Tell yuh what, if I pull out fer Idyho before my hoss is rested, I'll take the sorrel and leave yuh a century bill."

"When did yuh say yuh was goin'?" asked Koonts, his mind casting about to figure out how much money he might squeeze, first and last, out of this well pursed bandit.

"Oh, any time now," answered Tigheman. "I wouldn't mind pullin' out this evenin'. That stew Jakie threw into me shore makes me feel like a brand new hombre."

"So yuh figger if yuh had a fresh hoss yuh might pull west this evenin', huh?" prompted Koonts.

"Uh huh? Ain't that what I jest said?" said Tigheman peevishly.

Seven-up Cox was sidling toward them but it was obvious that Koonts didn't wish to be disturbed. Scowling Cox away, Koonts led Tigheman aside for private converse.

"Listen, Spider," he confided. "Maybe you and me can make another trade. I got a gal on my hands here; and I'd jest as lief get shed of her. I was aimin' to send her over to Pocatello, Idaho, with one of the boys. You're ridin' that way; maybe yuh could take her off my hands."

Tigheman's jaw went out in an assumedly suspicious snarl.

"Girl?" he barked. "You aimin' to unload some trouble on me, Koonts?"

Koonts grinned.

"If you'd see what a looker she is you

wouldn't call her such a hell of a lot of trouble. Want to take a peek at her, Spider?"

THEMAN appeared to consider awhile, stroking his bristly jaw. Then he allowed himself a leering crooked grin, matching that of Louie Koonts.

"What's the lay, Koonts?" he asked. "Ransom?"

"I was figgerin' on that at first," answered Koonts. "But I got cold feet. I would jest as soon leave it alone now, if I could git expenses back."

"Expenses? What d'yuh mean, expenses?"

"I had to pay around five hundred dollars to the boys who picked her up fer me," lied Koonts. "Yuh can give me that if yuh want, Spider; then take the gal and no questions asked. She'll think you're gonna take her to Pocatello and turn her loose; but that's your business."

Tigheman shook his head.

"I don't play ball that way, Koonts," he objected. "Any time I git caught runnin' off with a woman it'll be because I'm so dead stuck on her I ain't got no better sense. And I ain't never seen one in that class yet."

"You ain't seen this one," answered Koonts. "Take one slant at her and you may change your mind. She's got class, Spider, class and looks to burn. Why, fellah, you're young, half-way good lookin' if you had a shave, and yuh got plenty of coin. Treat this gal right and yuh might even talk her into marryin' yuh. She's human. And money talks, Spider. Of course you don't want to tell her yuh stole it. Here's a chanct to retire and reform, Spider."

Koonts threw back his great, black-bearded head and laughed heartily, fully appreciative of his own tremendous joke.

Tigheman shrugged.

"They ain't nothin' stirrin', Koonts." But in a moment he added, "Aw, hell, yuh got me interested, and I'd kinda like to take a peep at this dame. But I ain't interested five hundred dollars worth, though."

"You'll change your mind when you see her, Spider," said Koonts, taking Tigheman's arm. "Come on."

Seven-up Cox, with Schofield nearby, was hanging around as though he desired speech with the Spider.

"Say, Spider, how'd yuh leave Denver Joe?" Cox asked, as Koonts and Tigheman passed him.

The question startled Tigheman. However, he was saved from reply by Koonts who, so intent was he on his own schemings, resented the interruption of Cox.

"Spider and me got a deal on, Cox," barked Koonts.

And jostling Cox aside he led Tigheman up the porch steps and into the house. The two men passed down the corridor to a certain door, which Koonts unlocked and opened.

Naturally Dick was on edge for the crucial test at hand. Caroline, he knew, would recognize him instantly, and everything depended on her not crying out. So he allowed Koonts to step into the room first. Tigheman followed, keeping behind Koonts.

He saw Caroline sitting on a couch. More like a child than ever, she seemed to him even smaller than when he had first seen her in Lander. Now she was pitifully wan and weary; her black, curly hair was awry and her cheeks were stained with tears. Tigheman also noticed a certain fearful and unnaturally furtive desperation in her eyes, saw that one of her slim hands was in the pocket of her knickers; altogether she seemed to be trying to buck up her nerve to perform some act at which she shrank.

"Miss Jones, want yuh to meet Mr. Sallisaw," Koonts introduced, with elaborate courtesy. "He's headin' fer Pocatello, and I was kinda figgerin' on sendin' you with him."

During the speech of Koonts, Tigheman, at his back, saw the recognition come into Caroline's eyes. Her lips parted in amazement. She knew him, Dick Tigheman. So Dick, concealed by the outlaw, shook his head meaningly and put a finger over his lips. Then he played up quickly.

"Glad ter meet yuh, miss," he said.

CAROLINE'S cheeks, so wan and white till now, became suddenly flushed with intense excitement. Actually she felt an admixture of shame and joy. Shame that Dick Tigheman should find her a pawn of outlaws, joy because he had come to take her away.

Tigheman had by now slouched around in front of Koonts. He faked a smirk, and allowed his eyes to glow amorously as though swept from his feet by the girl's loveliness.

"Say, girlie," he said, "Louie here said you was a peach and I thought he was kiddin' me. Dam'f he ain't right. I reckon you'n me could git along right fine, huh?" Then turning to Koonts he added, "Sure, Koonts, I was goin' to Pocatello. Me and her'll start this evenin' if yuh say so."

"Suits me," grinned Koonts, but he twitched a thumb across his fingers several times, a reminder to the Sallisaw Spider about a certain good and valuable consideration, five hundred dollars.

Tigheman played up.

"Oh, yes," he said quickly. "I was about to forgit that six hundred smackers Denver Joe sent you, Louie. Yep, Joe said that sorrel hoss was worth every nickel of it, and much obliged. Here's the money, while I think of it." Dick took from his pocket a fat roll of bills and peeled off six hundred dollars. These he handed to Koonts, accompanying the payment with a wink.

"So yuh wanta start this evenin', huh?" asked the outlaw, pouching this latest velvet and well pleased all around with his trades.

He was wondering how far the Spider would get before the girl shot him with that gun. Whether she shot him or not, one thing was sure. When she got the ear of the law she would make small complaint about the treatment afforded her by Koonts. For Koonts had given her the gun.

"Yep, this evenin' we'll start—eh, girlie?" Tigheman turned to leer at Caroline. "Yuh got a hoss ready for her, Koonts?"

"I'll send Dode to round up one," announced Koonts briskly.

Stepping to the door he called to Dode Birch who was lounging up front. Birch answered his hail and was sent after the same horse on which the girl had arrived at the basin. While Koonts was speaking to Birch at the door, Tigheman leaned close to Caroline.

"Where's Squad One?" he whispered.

He was astounded by her answer, whispered softly.

"Denver Joe runs a game in Casper. Don't forget——"

But Koonts was turning around, saying, "All right, Sallisaw; you can go saddle the sorrel. The girl'll be ready by the time you are."

He stood aside, motioning for Tigheman to precede him out of the room. He didn't want Miss Jones to shoot her escort in his own house—let that scandalous development transpire far from his own door, thought Koonts. So he motioned for Tigheman to precede him from the room.

Perforce Tigheman had to do it. His mind was buzzing with the amazing information just given him by Caroline. What did it mean? What could Squad One have to do with Denver Joe's running a game in Casper?

Koonts and Tigheman had just stepped out in the corridor when they ran into Seven-up Cox, with Schofield in the offing.

Cox sidled up to Tigheman with an overdisplay of cordiality.

"Say, Spider," said Cox. "Boys was tellin' me yuh come by Denver Joe's place. How's Joe makin' it, the old son-of-a-gun?"

Tigheman, facing Cox, was suddenly aware that there was a heavy menace hanging thickly around him. A yard away from him he saw that Schofield was whispering something in Koonts' ear. He was likewise aware that Koonts became suddenly rigid; smothering an oath, Koonts' hand went to his gun butt as he turned to listen to the answer of the Spider to Cox. What Tigheman was not aware of was

that Caroline Jones, behind them in the room whose door had just been closed, was holding her breath in anguished suspense. And would the outlaws ever guess that she had heard the original frameup between Schofield and Cox? With her heart thumping she awaited Tigheman's answer.

"Oh, Denver Joe!" exclaimed Tigheman, grinning pleasantly at Cox. He pretended not to see Schofield or the menace of his half drawn gun. "Why," he went on, "Joe trimmed me fer a thousand, but he runs a straight game, all right. I knowed Joe long before he ever went to Casper. That's why I turned north from Laramie to see him—the old son-of-a-gun."

Both Cox and Koonts turned sneeringly upon Schofield. The crisis burst like a bubble. Tigheman went out to saddle his new-bought sorrel horse.

There was a mixture of triumph and despair surging through his heart. Triumph because he was going to salvage Caroline Jones from this ill-fated homestead venture, this scrap heap of blasted hopes; and despair because he was failing utterly to do anything for Squad One.

CHAPTER XV

ACCOUNTING FOR SQUAD ONE

KOONTS was well satisfied. Flash Forbes and Shoshone Charlie had disappeared, it was true, but all in all things were going well. Of course, thought Koonts, the temptation had been too much for Charlie; he must have murdered Forbes and made off with the entire cache. Still, along had come the Sallisaw Spider, greasing Koonts' palm with six hundred dollars and solving the embarrassing problem of the girl. Any harm the girl might experience would be blamed on the Spider. The seven imprisoned homesteaders were probably smothered by now. Also by now Henry Suggs, controlled by Mayme Suggs as rigidly as Koonts himself controlled Mayme, had doubtless filed on section 8, where lay the log house, and the basin was redeemed to Koonts.

Except, he admitted soberly, for the one element of the man Tigheman, whose fate was unknown. This fact pricked into Koonts' mind like a thorn. To clear it up, he decided to send out a scouting party to find Tigheman or his body. He called Dode Birch and bade him round up a dozen men, about half of those available, and scour the canyons and timbered slopes for trace of Tigheman.

Birch's party was soon on its way. It was late afternoon, now; twenty-four hours had elapsed since Oakes had been despatched to Lander. He who masqueraded as the Sallisaw Spider announced to Koonts that he was ready to leave, that he had saddled the horse which had been brought for the girl, as well as his own new sorrel. Koonts went in to get Caroline Jones. Soon he came out with her and personally assisted her to mount. He utilized this opportunity to extol his own high-minded motives.

"Remember," he whispered, "you got a gun, and he don't know it. Shoot him if he gets brash, and don't forget it was Louie Koonts what give yuh the gun."

Tigheman was mounted.

"Le's git goin'," he said.

But Schofield was pointing north across the lush.

"Look," he cried; "someone's comin', and ridin' hard. He's wavin' his hands like he might have somethin' doggone important to tell about."

Indeed a rider was galloping swiftly toward them.

"Wait a minute, Spider; this feller might know somethin' new," Koonts said. "Stick around till we git the dope."

Tigheman, impatient at the delay, nevertheless awaited the oncomer, preferring not to risk crossing Koonts. Throwing a leg over his saddle horn, he began rolling a cigarette.

It was while doing this that it seemed to him that he could detect a faint hum of voices which, oddly, seemed to come almost from under his horse's feet. His eye was casting about to see what might be causing such an illusion, when he again

noticed the low dome of yellowish clay a few yards to his left. It now struck him that this was the covering of a dugout, or storm cellar. But where was its entrance? A sharp suspicion shot through Tigheman's mind, a suspicion which concerned Squad One. Could the boys have been shut in that dugout, and the hole sealed?

As the possibility of this invaded his mind, cold sweat began to form on his forehead. What could he do? It seemed to him that both duty and love demanded that he seize the present opportunity, and make off with Caroline Jones. She was a defenseless girl, while Squad One was composed of men. Yet the thought of deserting them, even for a few hours, bled Dick's heart like the cutting edge of a knife. In the grip of such strenuously conflicting emotions was Tigheman that his attention entirely strayed from the oncoming rider, being trained instead upon that yellow bulge of clay at his feet. Koonts however had by this time discerned the rider to be a woman, Mayme Suggs.

Caroline Jones, sitting her horse close to Tigheman's, saw the Suggs woman and uttered a gasp of alarm. She knew Mayme could identify Tigheman. Dick heard Caroline's cry and felt her tugging nervously at his arm; but just as he looked up the hard-riding woman from Munson Gulch dashed into their midst.

Koonts was afoot, as were the dozen outlaws who had not been sent out scouting with Doge Birch. All of them crowded around Mayme to get her news. Tigheman took in the danger immediately.

"Too late to run," he whispered to Caroline. "Maybe she won't know me in this makeup. Watch your step." He pulled the Sallisaw Spider's old black felt hat far down over his eyes.

Mayme Suggs was already talking, with her usual verbosity, and this time she carried a theme which was of vital interest to them all.

"That good-for-nothin' Hank Suggs has squealed and run," she bawled, directing her information mainly to Koonts. "You was a fool to send me that note by Oakes, and I was a fool to let Hanks out of my sight."

She began to scream other more or less unintelligible incriminations.

KOONTS drew her out, and finally pieced out her yarn. According to instructions in the note brought by Oakes, she had sent her husband to Lander to file on section 8. But shortly after Hank's departure she had missed the note itself. Oakes had followed Hank Suggs, to find out if Lander was aware of the new basin war. And Oakes had come racing back to Munson Gulch with the worst news possible, news which outlawed Mayme Suggs and caused her flight to Koonts.

Instead of filing on section 8, Hank Suggs had last been seen boarding an eastbound C. and N. W. train with Corry, the Wind River Hotel waitress. But before doing so he had, according to a rumor heard in town by Oakes, tossed a certain note into a courthouse window. The window was that of Sheriff Hick's office and the note had made mention of Koonts' knowledge of the murder of Hank's predecessor, Mayme's first husband.

Thus Hank had killed two birds with one stone. He had escaped the menace of a fate similar to Munson's, and by tossing the note into the courthouse he had outlawed Mayme so that she would not dare pursue his elopement with a younger woman.

No wonder Mayme was furious. There was blood in her eyes but luckily these eyes had not yet fallen upon Tigheman. Koonts, except for the miscarriage of his plan to have Hank Suggs file on section 8 and thus protect the ownership of the log house, was not greatly disturbed. A posse would be along soon, probably, but that would be an old story. All the victims of this war would have disappeared and the outlaws would be scattered in the hills. The hounds would find neither salvage nor quarry. He turned to Tigheman.

"Spider," he said, "get goin' and don't stop. There's a——"

"What did you call him?" Mayme Suggs screamed suddenly. One of her long

skinny fingers pointed accusingly toward Dick. "Spider? That's not his name. He's a soldier; his name's Tigheman. He——"

Oaths from a dozen throats. Guns from a dozen holsters. Tigheman himself drew; but a dozen angry men closed around him, and around Caroline Jones. *Whish!* A rope fell over Tigheman's shoulders, pinioning his gun arm to his side, the noose drawn taut by the hand of Schofield.

"I knew he was phoney," crowed Schofield, much elated at his vindication. "Knew it when I first seed him. Shoot hell out of him, boys."

Eleven guns were leveled at Tigheman's head. The outlaws were all afoot; Tigheman, Caroline and Mayme Suggs alone were mounted. But the press was close around Tigheman and Caroline. Dick could do nothing, because his arms were drawn taut to his sides by a noose. Nor could they even make a desperate dash for it, because one outlaw had snatched the bridle of Tigheman's horse and another that of Caroline.

Koonts had wedged his big frame in betwen Dick and the girl.

"Yep, shoot hell out of him, men!" he roared. "We've had enough of this——"

Then the shrilly hysterical shriek of Caroline Jones arose above all other sounds.

"If there is one shot fired, I'll shoot too. And kill you, Mr. Koonts."

Koonts felt a cold cylinder in the back of his neck. He paled. Yes, he himself had given the girl that gun.

"Shoot anybody that gets brash," he had said.

And now, ironically enough, she was threatening to shoot him.

"Hold your fire, boys!" he bawled. "She's got me covered."

Yet even as he said it he gave Seven-up Cox a broad wink, accompanied by a backward jerk of his head. Cox began stealing backward out of the crowd. Yes, thought Koonts, the girl's ruse could gain her no more than half a minute. By that time Cox, sneaking around behind her, would have snatched away her gun. Only a half minute, thought Koonts, and they could resume the execution of Tigheman.

BUT a half minute was about ten seconds more than Squad One, imprisoned in the sealed dugout, needed to swing into action.

Enough of the speech without had drifted down their two inch metal-encased periscope to put them in possession of essential facts. Tigheman, masquerading as an outlaw, was about to leave the basin with Caroline Jones. Not for anything would Squad One have disturbed this program. Discussing the issue in cold blood, they had elected to make no outcry, to allow Tigheman to ride away without jeopardizing his scheme, whatever their own doom.

But now Mayme Suggs had spoiled everything. Squad One had heard her shrilly accusing cry, "His name's Tigheman."

Inside of a split second Ex-Corporal Goff had jerked two sticks of dynamite from his pocket. The explosives were already capped and fused, albeit the fuses, having been bitten in two by Goff, were quite short.

"This'll kill about half of us," said Goff to his fellows. "Them behind got the best chance, so you, Conroy, and you, Wooten, take the two guns and crouch low against the rear wall. Everybody else cover 'em. Get the idea? Save 'em. Save two men of old Squad One—two men out of eight fer Cap Tigheman, and for the sister of Hube Jones."

It was a martial order, and final, followed by no protest. Squad One met it gamely, loyally, as true as steel. Only Wooten and Conroy, armed with guns, would be much use in a fight. These crouched furthest from the door, while the others cushioned them with their own flesh. Goff leaped to the steps, crawled up their several risers; and on the top riser, the one which the butt of the oblique earth-weighted door lacked but an inch in touching—on this top riser he laid the two sticks of dynamite, fuses toward him. Striking his last match he lit the two short fuses.

Then Goff sprang back, back into the cellar, now a death trap, and pressed his

own virile flesh against that of his fellows. Of all Squad One, Goff was exposed the most.

Then, like the crack of doom, the explosion came; it was deafening, rocking the cave, rending its gloom with a blinding flash. A hundred chunks of debris pelted the huddling men. Goff was shocked to the floor face downward. Stamford, behind him, reeled a step through the fumes and fell on Goff. Then out of the tangled mass came two who were unhurt, wielding loaded guns. Cowboy Wooten of Wyoming and Buck Conroy of Texas sprang upward through the wreck of the stair well, shooting fast and straight.

Followed, straggling, others of Squad One—all but Stamford and Goff. Fleming, the Iowa red-head, and Bud McCune from Dakota dived with flailing fists into the band of outlaws around Tigheman's horse.

Koonts and his men, startled almost out of their boots by the sudden explosion, were all confusion. Schofield, holding the noose which pinioned Tigheman's arms, had jumped five feet. At the slack of the noose, Tigheman's arms were free and he crashed a gun barrel down on Koonts' head. Koonts fell like a log just as Wooten began shooting. Cox, slipping up behind Caroline, stopped a bullet from the gun of Conroy. Schofield fell, and two other outlaws. The rest ran for the hitchrack, in a funk, without even pulling a gun.

In ten seconds every surviving outlaw was aflight, Mayme Suggs, having the good fortune to be mounted at the start, far in the lead. The basin never saw them again.

All but Goff and Stamford were out of the hole. Hogan and McCune went back for them. Tigheman caught Caroline Jones in his arms just as she swayed in her saddle.

"These are your brother's comrades," he whispered. "They're men, real men. And I am only a bungling fool. But just the same I love you, Caroline."

The girl neither answered nor opened her eyes. Dick held her, pale and afaint, in his arms. Oddly and grotesquely contrasting to her forlorn estate, the gun given her by Koonts still hung by the trigger guard from her finger.

They were leading Stamford out now, dazed but miraculously alive. Goff was the only casualty, and they brought him out last. Yet even Goff was able to stand, though he could not see Tigheman. Now, nor ever again, would he see the faces of his comrades or the glory of the sun.

He was blind, was Goff; yet he stood erect and faced Tigheman. Tigheman looked into the sightless eyes and saw the lips move. And the words which he heard were words writ in a book, a soldier's book—those amazingly simple words by which he is taught to answer the rollcalls of honor and of love. Tigheman heard them, and, freighted with heroic memories, they pierced to the very tenderest corpuscle of his heart.

"'Squad One all present or accounted for'," reported Corporal Goff.

THE NEWTON GUNFIGHT

By EDWIN L. SABIN

WHEN the Santa Fe Railroad was building through Kansas the new town of Newton, at end of track, for a time outrivaled the reputation of wild-and-woolly Dodge. Here, in Tim Shea's dance-hall, occurred one of the bloodiest gunfights in the history of the West. A large party of Texans had ridden in from the trail, had shot things up about as they pleased, and had left word that they were coming back to do it over again. Shea gathered some thirty gunmen of his own, and on the appointed night was ready.

The Texans stormed in by the front door; the Shea company rushed in by the rear door—and the two parties met, shooting, upon the floor. Out went the lights; the battle continued, in a stand up and take it, in the darkness. Revolvers were emptied in fifteen minutes. Then came a lull; and when the lamps were relighted fourteen men had been killed, and an unknown number wounded. Shea himself was dead. A dancehall girl had lost an eye, and was thenceforth dubbed One-Eyed Molly.

WORDS OF FIRE

By SEWELL PEASLEE WRIGHT

Author of "Dum-Dums"

"Silky" his city crook pals dubbed John Blanchard, shrewdest and craftiest of them all—and "silky" he was to the end even though the far reaches of the frozen North were substituted for his familiar city haunts

WITH his thumbnail John Blanchard scratched a small peek-hole in the thick frost on the window and looked out.

There was a team of dogs pouring down from the ridge toward the camp, scampering and romping on the firm crust, their traces slack. Behind the toboggan, straining on the tail-rope with both mittened hands, was a wiry little half-breed whom Blanchard did not recognize. Kneeling on the back of the toboggan, an ugly automatic in his hand, was Lawson—Nick Lawson, sometimes known six or seven hundred miles south of where he was now as Nick the Gun.

Blanchard noted that the hands that grasped the weapon were significantly bare.

"The end of the rope," whispered Blanchard, talking to himself in the silence of the little room. "What a long, tangled rope it has been! And through what dark and slimy places it has been dragged!"

He had leaned far out of his bunk to look through the window; now he swung his feet, one of them cruelly swollen under its rough bandages, back under the matted rabbit-skin robe. Fumbling blindly on a little shelf over his head, he produced a battered but still aristocratic box of cigarettes and a silver match-safe worn smooth and shiny with use.

With deliberate care he selected one of the few remaining cigarettes, tapped it deliberately on the back of one hand, placed it between his cracked and blackened lips. Just as he applied a match a sharp, insistent rap sounded on the door.

Blanchard exhaled a swirling wave of fragrant smoke.

"Come!" he invited clearly.

There was a moment of hesitation, and then the latch clicked up and the door swung slowly inward. The 'breed who had been driving the dogs stood in the opening, a sharp silhouette against the blinding whiteness of the snow outside. His attitude, as he peered into the semi-gloom of the camp, was one of alertness, almost of panic.

"Come in, come in," said Blanchard politely. "I'm sorry I can't get up to receive you, but my foot is bothering me a bit. Tell Lawson he can approach with perfect safety; my only gun is hanging over there

against the wall. It's perfectly safe, on my word, Nick!" he added, raising his voice.

LAWSON dodged out from behind the shelter of the logs and blustered into the room, pushing the rather confused 'breed out of the way and slamming the door behind him.

"I was playin' it safe, see?" he growled, swaggering up to Blanchard's bunk. "A guy that'll double-cross a pal ain't none above bumpin' him off on the q.t. Surprised to see me, Silky?"

Blanchard shook his head, smiling.

"I knew you'd get here some day, Nick. You're that kind. You have an admirable tenacity that's worthy of a better cause. As a sleuth you would have been an outstanding success; really, Nick, I'm afraid you missed your calling!"

"Cut it!" snarled Nick. "You don't need to run off no spiel like that to let me know you gotta fine line. I know all about it; didn't you softsoap me into that Wycliffe job, and then pull out with the ice? Thought you'd gyp me outa my end, eh? Well, you got another guess comin', Silky. Come clean now, or——"

He glanced with unmistakable significance at the weapon in his hands.

"Your end, Nick? There's no end for you, man. You were to do half the work and we were to divide the spoils equally. But you didn't do your work. You indulged a bit too freely of your—er, dream dust, and were *non compos* when the time came. So I turned the trick alone; very neatly, if I may say so."

"What if I was coked up?" snarled Nick sullenly. "You could 'a' waited, couldn't you? There was other nights comin'. But you had to ram right on, without——"

"If you remember the circumstances, Nick," explained Blanchard patiently, "it was one of those affairs that couldn't wait. The elder Mr. Wycliffe was, as perhaps you recall, a collector of precious stones. At the time of his death, the major portion of his wealth was known to be tied up in his collection of gems.

"It stood to reason that his only heir, Miss Wycliffe, would very quickly convert these stones into available cash that could be safely invested in interest-bearing securities. A charming young woman, Nick, charming. I have met her several times."

Dreamily he took a last long pull on his cigarette, exhaled slowly and thoughtfully, and ground out the fire against the edge of his bunk.

"You were slick enough," admitted Nick grudgingly. "You didn't come by your monicker for nothing, Silky. But you done me out of my edge, and I want it right now!"

Blanchard knew the look in Nick's eyes. He had seen that stony look in men's eyes before. Nick was a killer.

COOLLY Blanchard lit another cigarette, Nick watching every move with a tense fixity of gaze that reminded Blanchard, ridiculously enough, of a cat looking through a window at a bird on the lawn.

"Have one?" asked Blanchard, offering the aristocratic package to Nick.

"I got my own," said Nick bruskly. "I'm waitin' for you to come clean on those sparklers, Silky."

Blanchard put the cigarettes away carefully and blew a meditative cloud up into the gloom above the pole rafters.

"You have a vile taste in cigarettes, Nick," he said softly. "Vile. And as for the diamonds, I've decided——"

He paused, smiling faintly, and watched with interest the hurrying spirals of smoke that wreathed up from the end of the cigarette.

"What?" snapped Nick, his eyes snaky.

"To return Miss Wycliffe's property," finished Blanchard calmly. "She was very nice—I met her, you know. I'm afraid that these stones were about all she had. Thoughtless of me to take them, I guess. My conscience has—er, been hurting me, Nick, since I've been up here with plenty of time to think it over. Nick, you are gazing at Silky John Blanchard, reformed!" He laughed mockingly up into Nick's flushed face.

"You kiddin' me?" growled Nick

hoarsely. "If you are, cut it! I'm tellin' you. I ain't chased to hell and gone after you for the last six, seven months, just to listen to a fast line of chatter. I want my split on that ice, and no damn' foolin'. You know me, Silky I ain't squeamish. You come clean now and you'll save yourself some grief!"

"Nick, you always were an impetuous sort of person," replied Blanchard quietly. "You'll grow old before your time—if the rope or the chair doesn't interfere with the plans of divine Providence. I'm sorry to have to repeat myself, but—you're wasting your time so far as the Wycliffe stones are concerned."

"I am, eh?" snarled Nick. His short, ugly automatic swung around menacingly, and Blanchard gazed placidly into the black muzzle. "See this?" He shook the gun menacingly. "Well——"

"It needs cleaning, Nick," said Blanchard gently. "You always were careless with firearms!"

"Don't you worry about that!" raged Nick, white dimples of anger at the roots of his nostrils and the corners of his lips. "It'll shoot, and that's all——"

Blanchard raised one hand in protest.

"Wait a moment, Nick," he admonished. Carefully he swung his leg clear of its covers. "See that, Nick?" he asked, with a casual nod in the direction to the swollen monstrosity that had been his right foot. "Did it with an ax. You see, I left the bush country when I was nineteen or twenty, and, while I learned other things outside, I forgot how to handle an ax. An ax is an important thing, Nick. If it were not for this foot I wouldn't be here now, waiting for you."

Nick whispered an oath, staring down at the puffed and distorted member as though its hideousness fascinated him.

"Pretty bad, isn't it?" Blanchard flicked the cover back over the injured foot. "It's infected, you see. I did it while coming back from a trip to the post. The frost got to it. That's why you can't frighten me with your gun, Nick. The gun would be rather more merciful than *that*. At nights it's pretty bad."

"But a doctor," began Nick.

"Exactly," nodded Blanchard. "The difficulty is in finding the doctor with a set of operating instruments."

"Come clean with me and I'll take you to town," urged Nick eagerly. "We've got a real team of dogs there, and we'll leave the junk here and take you out in one-two-three time. Will you?"

Blanchard shook his head.

"I couldn't stand the trip, Nick. It's pretty bad. I doubt if a medico could do any good if he were to operate today, even. And, anyway, I'm not splitting up the Wycliffe gems with you or anybody else."

THE last words were uttered quietly enough, but they aroused Nick to a sudden, terrific burst of anger.

"Listen! You tell me where them rocks are, or I croak you r i g h t there! S'help me I will, Silky!" His finger, white at the knuckles, nursed the trigger.

Blanchard studied the working face back of the automatic, his eyes calm and speculative.

"I believe you would, Nick," he said. "Your nerves are in pretty bad shape, I fancy. Out of—er, dream dust?"

"Listen, Silky, I'm warnin' you," gasped Nick. "You come clean, or——"

"Hand me that pencil, Nick," said Blanchard suddenly. "I've just thought of a way out!"

Nick glanced up at the little shelf Blanchard had indicated, but made no move to pick up the pencil.

"What for?" he snapped, his face twitching with nervousness, and his words gasped out as though short of breath.

"The stones are not here. I'll write out —instructions," replied Blanchard. "The pencil, please."

Doubtfully, warily, keeping Blanchard covered every instant, Nick handed down the pencil.

"Don't do anything funny, now," he warned. "I'm warnin' you——"

Blanchard propped himself up in his bunk and wrote for a moment on a blazed spot on one of the logs. Dropping back wearily, he tossed the pencil to the floor and smiled up triumphantly.

"There's the information you want, Nick," he said very softly. "You'll never

lay your dirty paws on the stones, though. Miss Wycliffe——"

Nick apparently did not hear a word Blanchard said. He bent over, staring with flaming eyes at the four words Blanchard had written on the clean, blazed spot on the log.

"You hocked 'em, did you?" snarled Nick suddenly. "You lie, damn you! They're here, somewhere, and I'm going to find them! And there ain't no fence by that name big enough to handle rocks like them. I warned you—I warned you——"

He fairly sobbed the last words, and his finger tightened on the trigger.

There was a flash of stabbing fire, a deafening thunder of sound, the stinging tang of smokeless powder in the air.

"I warned you—" choked Nick, while the 'breed, who up until this moment had stood by the door motionless, silent, and expressionless, rushed up, his black eyes glittering with excitement.

"Damn, *M'sieu'! Sang dieu!* You shoot, keel! Now the Red Coats he come, ketchum queek——"

Blanchard opened his eyes. His face was gray, and little muscles twitched here and there, but he managed to keep his voice calm and steady.

"That's—right," he said. "They told me—at the post—that they're looking—for me. I—thought of that—too. They'll—get you—Nick! I'm sorry—you've just done me—a good turn. It hurt—pretty bad—at night——"

The gentle voice of Silky John Blanchard trailed off into silence. Into the Great Silence.

SOME two hours later the 'breed did just exactly what John Blanchard had done earlier in the day; with his fingernail he scraped a peep-hole through the thick frost on the glass and looked out.

"By hell! Damn! *Nom du nom, m'sieu'*—look! The Red Coats, he come lak I say. You stay, no see what come. Damn! You wan beeg fool, *m'sieu!* I know heem, theese Red Coat. Like the carcajou, he ees; ver' queek to see what ees eet."

Nick, his face white, brushed the 'breed aside and peered out the window. It was true; there was another man approaching. Nick recognized the uniform the man wore with a thrill of dread. He had heard of the men who wore the scarlet tunic.

"A Mounty!" he whispered.

The 'breed nodded.

"Corp'ral Berkhead!" he said, a note of awe, almost of reverence in his voice.

"I'll bump him off if he says anything to me," growled Nick. "He wouldn't be the first cop I've stopped a clock for!"

He crouched tensely in a shadowy corner, sullenly watching the door, ready for instant action. The 'breed, terror written large on his broad face, stood close by, also watching the door.

Nick heard the Mounty speak to his dogs, heard the crisp sound of the crust under his pacs. A commanding rap sounded through the room.

"Come in!" said Nick hoarsely, and raised his gun.

The door swung open and for a moment the motionless figure of the Mounty was framed there. On the instant Nick fired, but as he did so the 'breed, with a sudden guttural cry of warning to Berkhead, struck up the weapon.

With an animal cry of rage Nick clubbed the gun and sent the 'breed crashing against the wall, but before he had time for another move Berkhead was upon him. One sharp clip of the Mounty's bony fist rocked Nick in his tracks; a second blow, fairly on the button, sent him twitching to the floor.

The tall, almost cadaverous Mounty looked around the room thoughtfully. Last of all he glanced at the 'breed.

"Thanks, Joe," he said quietly. "That was a good turn you did me just then. It makes up some for the bad company you're in. Just what's the story, anyway?"

JOE explained as well as he could in excited Cree. He did not speak English very well and had not understood a great deal of what had been said, for Nick's underworld jargon was fully as incomprehensible to Joe as had

been Blanchard's unusual words and phrases.

When Joe had finished, Berkhead nodded thoughtfully. "I had word of this other chap, too," he said. He stooped and slipped a pair of handcuffs onto the still unconscious, moaning Nick. "He's a pal of this Blanchard, or used to be. As I get it, Blanchard got away with the loot, and this other fellow comes trailing him with blood in his eye. Blanchard refuses to split, and this fellow gets his back up and shoots Blanchard. The question now is—where are the stones?"

Berkhead was talking half aloud as he turned the matter over in his mind, fixing the facts for future reference and consideration. It was a way he had. His last words aroused the dazed man on the floor, for he sat up and stared around with dull eyes.

"Yes, tell me that," he mumbled. "Where are the stones? Silky said he hocked 'em, but he's a damn' liar. He never done it. And there ain't no fence by that name, either. I know! He tried to kid me, and I bumped him off. Double-crossin' —" he lapsed into a dribble of foul invective.

"What did he say?" asked Berkhead sharply, putting his hands under Nick's arms and lifting him to his feet.

Nick stared at his captor dully.

"Say? He didn't say nothin'," Nick muttered sullenly. "What's the idea of the bracelets?"

"I thought that was suited to your style of beauty, that's all. They'll keep you safe while I get busy and find where our friend here cached the stuff he stole."

"Ha!" laughed Nick mirthlessly. "Think so, do you? Cast your eyes around this place—don't you think we've been lookin' the last two, three hours? Hell of a fat chance you got!"

Berkhead had already noted the disorder of the room. The dead man's bunk had been torn apart; boxes and dishes of foodstuffs had been emptied out on the floor and on the table; clothes had been torn down from the wall. A pack that had been flung down in one corner had been ransacked and its contents lay strewn everywhere.

"The things are here somewhere," said the Mounty quietly. "He had them when he came into the bush, and they're still here. It's just a matter of time."

"It is, is it?" sneered Nick. "You're one of the wise babies, ain't you? Then dope that out!" And with his two manacled fists he pointed at the blazed spot upon which Blanchard had written the four words.

BERKHEAD read the four words over and over again, a sharp, puzzled frown between his brows. Sneeringly, Nick watched the expression of bewilderment grow on Berkhead's face.

"A hell of a help, ain't it?" he taunted.

Berkhead glanced at his prisoner thoughtfully.

"It's plain enough, if I could only get my wits together," said the Mounty slowly. "It's familiar, but it has been a long time since——"

He turned back to the blazed spot, with its tantalizing message. The frown deepened between his eyes.

"Damn it!" he muttered. "I know what that means—if I could only think!"

"Mean?" snarled Nick bitterly. "It's plain enough what it says: he hocked the sparklers with some dago by the name of Vinces. But that's a lie; they're right around here somewhere. He was just trying to kid somebody!"

Berkhead paid no attention to Nick's remarks. The Mounty was muttering the four words over and over again, as though by the persistent repetition he could wring from them the elusive meaning that was just out of reach in some dark, forgotten recess of his mind.

At last he shrugged disgustedly and turned to the 'breed.

"Watch him, Joe," he said, nodding at Nick. "I'm going to feed the dogs. It's too late to start out today; we'll lay over here until morning, and get an early start."

He paused a moment, considering. Joe was only a 'breed, and therefore not quite to be trusted. He had brought Nick in, and perhaps it would be better not to leave them alone together.

"Come to think of it, you'd better come

along and attend to your own dogs, Joe. One or two of them look like rather nasty huskies and you can handle them better than I. Bring him along; we'll both watch him."

Joe grunted agreement, and the three went outside.

Nick watched with interest while the two men quickly unharnessed and tied their dogs. Joe's dogs were mostly mongrels; gaunt, hard-bitten brutes that cowered and snarled when the 'breed came near, but the Mounty had a string of fine, lean huskies that seemed, in their savage, undemonstrative way, to have a real affection for Berkhead.

While the dogs were snarling over their hunks of frozen meat Berkhead looked around the clearing admiringly.

"Nice place for a camp," he remarked to Joe. "Those two ridges there to cut off the wind and keep the snow from drifting badly, and that clump of willows and birch to keep off the wind from the lake. Wonder who built the place?"

Joe shrugged. There was enough Indian blood in him to make him taciturn.

"Must have been a woman here at some time or other," observed Berkhead. "Some good Frenchman and his wife, no doubt. Look!"

On a big birch that grew near the door of the camp some previous occupant had nailed a cross of unpeeled twigs, and near the foot of the tree, just visible above the snow, was a little low bench made of birch logs, adzed off smoothly on top, making the whole a sort of crude, outdoor *prie-dieu*.

Joe, who knew something of the teachings of the Black Coats, made the sign of the cross.

"Some woman, yes," he nodded. "A man, he pray only when he need help, eh?"

BERKHEAD did not reply. He was staring at the cross, black against the ragged white bark of the birch. In his eyes was a dawning light of understanding—of triumph.

Eagerly, while Joe and Nick watched with curious eyes, he strode over to the tree. With his bare finger he clawed at the bark just below the cross.

"He must be hopped up," muttered Nick. "Just look at the damn——"

He stopped suddenly, and his eyes seemed ready to pop from their sockets.

A section of bark as large as a man's palm swung back like a door under Berkhead's eager fingers, revealing a little recess cut into the trunk of the tree. And in the cavity was a little chamois bag, grimy with dirt, that clicked sharply as Berkhead seized it and held it up triumphantly.

"Oh, my God!" whispered Nick, shaking his manacled hands together in a sort of impotent frenzy. "There all the time, and me so close to them! A hundred grand in sparklers——"

Berkhead swung back the piece of bark, pressing it in place, and the closest observer would not have guessed that it had ever been disturbed. The spot looked like a dozen other ragged pieces of bark on the same tree.

"Clever," said Berkhead. "Had the bark stuck down with bits of pitch. If it hadn't been for his message, no one——"

"His message?" Nick fairly shrieked the words. "Them words he wrote there? They didn't say anything about the stuff being stuck in that damned tree! He said he'd hocked the stuff at some wop fence's place. 'In hock. Signor Vinces' was what he wrote. Don't you think I can read?"

"Let's go inside," chuckled Berkhead as he stuffed the precious chamois bag deep in a pocket. "It's pretty sharp out here."

Berkhead lit the lamps, for dusk was rapidly falling outside, and the one small, square window admitted but little light at best.

"I knew the words were familiar, but I couldn't place them," explained Berkhead when the lamps were lit. "When I saw that cross on the tree, the meaning popped into my mind, and it was clear as day.

"In one of my school readers there was a story about some old emperor of Rome, Constantine, I think his name was, who was doing a lot of fighting. He saw, the story went, a big blazing cross in the heavens, with a motto in words of fire over it. He took the cross and that motto and had it made into his banner, and, as I remember it, won all his battles."

"But in God's name," said Nick desperately, "what's that got to do with this?"

"It was that motto that this poor devil wrote over his bunk," explained Berkhead. "See?"

He pointed to the words on the blazed spot, and read them again, just as Blanchard had written them:

"In hoc
signo vinces."

"It means," went on Berkhead slowly, "'Beneath this sign conquer!' and is always used in conjunction with a cross. He figured you wouldn't be able to puzzle it out—and that somebody else would."

For a long time Nick was silent, staring at the four words Blanchard had written above his bunk. Then Nick's eyes strayed down to the motionless form on the bunk, and his glance rested there almost reverently.

"'Silky,' we called him," whispered Nick. "Smoothest, brainiest worker in the whole damn' mob. 'Silky.' God, he was slick!" Nick glanced up at Berkhead, his eyes brooding. "What a crook you would have made!" he muttered appraisingly. "With a head like yours——"

Berkhead smiled. He understood what Nick had meant to say. It was the tribute of one craftsman to another.

JUANITA, OF DOWNIEVILLE

By JIM DAN HILL

THERE is one incident in the history of the Western mining camps of which every old-timer is ashamed—the hanging of Juanita, a monte dealer in Downieville, California, upon the order of a court that was but little more than an instrument of a mobocracy. She was the only woman so treated by any body of miners in the history of the old mining frontier.

It might be traced to the fact that Joe Cannon, a stalwart Britisher, insisted upon outdoing his American friends in the celebration of the Fourth of July, in the year of 1851. In the early hours of the following morning, Joe and a party of friends were hilariously reeling down the streets in search of their own rude huts. They approached a cabin from which gleamed a light and recognized it as the home of a Mexican gambler, with whom the small, olive complexioned and voluptuous Juanita lived as man and wife.

Some afterward said that Joe kicked the door just as a matter of policy—he had done so at almost all the other houses along the street—and that the door fell in, thus precipitating the tipsy Joe to the floor inside the boxlike room. Others claimed that he merely placed his eye to the latchstring hole for a peep inside when one of his companions gave him a shove.

Be that as it may, Joe struggled to his feet and opened a conversation in broken Spanish with the surprised husband. None of the witnesses understood the words that passed, nor saw a motive in what followed. But the petite Juanita must have, for she suddenly leaped from the pallet in the corner of the room and with a tiger-like spring plunged a long knife into Joe's breast.

If Joe had been less popular, the result might have been different. As it was, the next day up came the miners from the gulches. Cradles were left idle and claims deserted. There was a note of vengeance in the air. A huge pavilion, erected for the Fourth of July celebration, was turned into a courtroom. Getting a jury was but the work of minutes. There were many witnesses for the prosecution, but very few for the defence. When one, Dr. Cyrus D. Aiken, gave testimony favorable to the young woman, he was hooted from the stand. A Mr. Thayer attempted a speech in her behalf, but was literally kicked from the platform.

The verdict gave her four hours in which to put her house in order. Then, dressed in her fiesta clothes, she led the trooping mob to the bridge from which she was to be hanged. Refusing to be touched by her executioners, she adjusted the noose herself and insisted that her hands be left untied. She signified her readiness with a smile and a gesture. A lighthearted *"Adios, señores!"* closed the incident for her.

The Downieville Vigilantes have been blamed for this affair more than once, but apparently unjustly so. According to the records of the Committee of Vigilance in that district the Vigilantes were not organized until several weeks later.

MURDER AT THREE ORPHANS

By EUGENE CUNNINGHAM

Author of "Ware Calls It a Day," "The Fortieth Thief," etc.

That case at Three Orphans was none of Ware's affair—but when a man who may be innocent is headed for the gallows when won't a Texas Ranger step in and take a hand?

"OLD PEGLEG" was all that Ware had heard him called. If he had another name, it seemed entirely unimportant to the male population of El Atajo. Ware, who had come to the little 'dobe town at the crossroad which gave it its name only because it lay on his road as he moved upon a patrol of the Burro Mountain country, was mildly interested in the leathery-faced old fellow, but no more than that.

It was now noon and old Pegleg had jogged into town upon his saddle mule shortly after the townspeople of El Atajo had finished an early breakfast. In Curly Harter's saloon Pegleg was buying drinks for all who would accept and occupying the center of the floor with a discussion of mules in general and the particular sagacity of "Geronimo," his own mount. They listened to his maunderings but to Ware it seemed that this attention was no more than prelude to something else.

Ware sat in a corner somewhat aloof from everyone else; an untouched drink was on the small pine table before him and he smoked with mind wholly at ease, untroubled—for the first time in months—by any problem of his profession. Curly Harter came over and leaned against the whitewashed wall, with a sardonic blue eye upon his customers.

"What's she all about?" inquired Ware half-idly. "Who's this ol' hairpin, Pegleg? Yuh might figure he was apt to write his will an' leave all the town somethin', way they're millin' around him."

"Well, they're lookin' fer just about that same," Curly grunted thoughtfully. "Me, I ain't got a bit o' use fer that ol' hellcat; I figger he'd cut his brother's throat in a minute fer the sum o' ten centavos Mex money. He's ben kickin' around these-yere hills fer thirty year an' he's shore bad medicine from the forks o' the creek, Pegleg is.

"Used to be a mule-skinner fer freight contractors an' later on fer the stage company. An' he's prospected a heap, too. All time, a mightily pizen customer to cross—Lord only knows how many he's rubbed out in his time, fer he ain't whut yuh'd call a six-gun man; rifle's his pet an' bushwackin' a man is his idee o' the easiest way. I

reckon if yuh could squeeze a confession out o' the ol' sidewinder, yuh'd just about clear up ever' murder mystery in this country."

"What're they expectin'?" pressed Ware, a slight curiosity rising in him as he studied the leathery brown face and tiny black eyes—vicious, both, as a desert sidewinder's—of the one-legged old-timer.

"Well, two month or so ago, he come a-ridin' in on that outlaw mule o' his'n, just like he come today. Nobody paid him no mind; he was always joggin' in an' joggin' out an' Tim Rafferty, the freighter, he says later that *he* see Pegleg on the aidge o' town just the night before this, anyhow. Though I reckon Tim was mistook, an' Pegleg he says Tim couldn't have, him not bein' there. Anyhow, he piled off in front o' 'Silent' Smith's assay place an' went in.

"They say he was packin' a tow-sack. He stayed inside three-four hours an' when he come out he hit straight fer here an' he had money an' he was grinnin' like—like the devil. Ever'body was right curious, o' course, to know what was goin' on, but he just kept on grinnin' an' them that went to see Silent Smith, they shore found out how-come Smith was called 'Silent.' But, couple days later, Smith did admit that ol' Pegleg'd stumbled onto some mighty rich placer-ground an' had follered up till he come to a vein where yuh could just pry out gold with a knife-point."

"Nobody else ever find free gold around here?" inquired Ware.

"Shore! But not a lot an' not lately. Talk is, ol' Pegleg, he's stumbled onto the ol' Spanish mine. Folks've been huntin' that fer fifty year now. Well, Silent Smith, he says all he knows is whut Pegleg's told him an' that ain't much. He's buyin' nuggets an' dust from Pegleg. Folks, o' course, are tryin' to git Pegleg drunk so's to make him spill directions."

"They've followed him, o' course," said Ware.

"Shore—a piece!" grinned Curly with an amused sniff. "Huh! Yuh might's well set out to foller a tumbleweed or—or a puff o' smoke! That ol' devil—an' his mule, too—they just evap'rate some'r's in the foothills o' the Burros. I hear as how somebody went up-country an' fetched in a couple Injuns fer trailers. Well—mebbe that's how-come a couple dead warwhoops was found over in a canyon clost to Jornado Triste."

"How was that?"

"Simple enough! They'd both been shot in the back with a .45-90. 'Course, lots an' lots o' folks use a .45-90 Winchester; Pegleg does, just fer instance."

"Well!" grinned Ware with a shrug, pushing back the bullion-embroidered sombrero from his still, brown face, "all this ain't nothin' in my life."

"Nary thing!" nodded the saloon man agreeably, but with a shade of hesitancy that caught Ware's attention. "Listen to the ol' hellion, will yuh!"

ONE of the men of El Atajo was insisting upon buying Pegleg a drink. He wore a broad, artificial-seeming grin of camaraderie; he had the wicked-faced old ragamuffin by the arm and apparently Pegleg was regarding him as a boon companion. They edged in to the bar and the bartender set bottle and glasses before them, then spun glasses along to the others in the barroom.

"Yuh know, Pegleg," said the fellow with the friendly grin, "lots o' folks laughed at yuh fer huntin' them ol Spanish diggin's. But me, I always says, we-ll, mebbe yuh folks is right, but—I do'know, I says. If 'twas anybody else but Pegleg mebbe I'd think she was plumb foolish, but that man, I tells 'em, he ain't like most. He figgers out whut he's goin' after an' he sees ever' little sign an' so, one day—Well, he'll just foller up his sign an' there'll be the gold. Ain't it so, Pegleg? Didn't yuh find her just like that? C'm'on, now! Take another one; tell the folks!"

Pegleg nodded owlishly, but to Ware, watching him intently, it seemed that a flicker of malicious amusement showed for a flash in the little black eyes.

"Sho' was!" agreed Pegleg, refilling his glass and emptying it in a single smooth motion that ended with the clink of the empty on the bar. "Started out, I did, an' scallyhooted all around the country. Come to a pile o' rocks——"

"What kind o' rocks was these, Pegleg?" inquired the man of the grin. "Yuh don't

mean that-there big pile over clost to Jornado Triste, do yuh?"

"These was a kind o' reddish rock," Pegleg said with the expression of one attempting to report exactly, "an' they has, mebbe, li'l streaks o' blackish in 'em. Not in all, o' course; just in some. They was shaped—oh, some was kind o' pointed an' others was round. Anyway, yuh'd know 'em by the yuccas!"

"Yuccas!" repeated the spokesman of the crowd. "How d'yuh mean, Pegleg? What was peculiar about them yuccas?"

"Why—" Pegleg hesitated while deathly stillness gripped the throng around him—"she's kind o' hard, mebbe, to make this just ex-actly clear, but—well, the main thing about all them yuccas I'm mentionin' is that their roots, yuh know, well——"

"Yeh! Yeh! Roots!" nodded the man of the grin. "Their roots——"

"All went straight down into the ground!" cried Pegleg, then hung with both hands to the bar as he wrestled with an overpowering fit of yelling laughter.

Even Ware's shoulders shook at sight of the disgruntled faces around the old man. But Curly Harter seemed hardly to have heard any of the business. Ware lifted his glass and drained it, then got up leisurely, slapping smooth the front of his fringed jacket of soft-tanned goatskin—that masked the twin white Colts in their John Wesley Hardin holsters. He fished a dollar from his pocket and laid it upon the table.

"Well, I got to be lookin' things over up the line," he grunted to the saloon man. "See yuh comin' back, I reckon."

"Got to go, huh?" said Curly absently. "Uh-huh. I see. But—uh—before yuh ramble, Ware, like to have yuh—uh—meet somebody. C'm'on out. Yo' nag's at my hitch rack, ain't he?"

"Who's it?" inquired Ware, with thoughtful narrowing of green eyes. It was suddenly apparent to him that his departture had been purposely delayed by Curly Harter until this moment.

But Curly, humming somewhat overenergetically, Ware thought, kept a full pace ahead on his way to the door and seemed not to hear the question. So they came out of the press in the barroom and through the wide front portal onto the wide, 'dobe-pillared front veranda.

CURLY was still in the lead. He moved down the veranda until he came to the wooden bench against the building-wall. Ware followed at awkward, high-heeled horseman's gait, frowning a little. And around the corner of the building, onto the veranda, came a girl, flushed of clear face, bare of sleek, dark head, a slender figure in plain gingham apron the sleeves of which were rolled high upon rounded arms. Ware stopped short, instantly, with the beginning of a scowl.

"Marie," said Curly Harter, "this is Ranger Ware, top-cutter o' the whole blame' outfit. An' I know mighty well he'll be tickled stiff to do anything he can to he'p yuh-all out."

Ware nodded jerkily, inwardly cursing Curly Harter. Everywhere he went it was this way—a Ranger was supposed to be some sort of fix-it-up. Everybody brought the Ranger his—or her troubles, expecting him to drop any business he might have and settle the mystery of a strayed cow or a wild-riding son or some such thing.

"I don't know how much Mr. Harter has told you," the girl began hesitantly.

"Nothin'," shrugged Curly. "Pegleg's been makin' too much noise inside."

"Then, here's the situation, Mr. Ware: first, my brother is in jail, charged with murder and robbery—neither of which charge is true. Second, my father has disappeared. I'm—I'm just about mad with worry."

"But," Ware frowned, "yuh see, Miss, I'm——"

"Now ,now," said Curly quickly. "I know whut yuh're aimin' to say: a ranger ain't s'posed to mix into county affairs until county authorities has asked him to. I know that; I used to be sher'ff o' this county. But the way things stand in this business, Billy—Marie's kid-brother—he's due to be tried an' found guilty an' hung, on the evidence the county attorney's got. An' no outside he'p'll *be* sent fer. She looks like an open-an'-shut case, way she is."

"Then the sher'ff an' county attorney'll likely raise cain about my bein' here," retorted Ware.

"Umm—mebbe so," nodded Curly. "O' course, that skeers yuh half to death. Like the Mexican Gov'ment's howl when yuh went acrost the river at Leesville an' toted back Hawssface Gomez."

Ware grinned faintly at this, recollecting, as he did, how the adjutant general had, with fingers crossed, as it were, severely reprimanded him for a breach of international law.

"What's the trouble?" he asked resignedly and somehow, with the girl's frank eyes so trustfully steady upon him, he could not feel irritated at being thus thrust into a problem that did not officially concern him. "I mean, what's the real run o' this boy's snarl?"

"Billy was stage-station keeper out at Three Orphans," explained Curley Harter, when the girl had nodded at him to tell the tale. "Been out there nigh a year, hadn't he, Marie? Yeh. Well, one evenin' kind o' late the stage pulled into Billy's station from Falby up in the hills. Nobody aboard her but the driver an' shotgun guard. An' she was packin' twenty-five thousand in gold bars.

"Billy, he comes out to tell 'em the's no change o' mules fer 'em; somehow, he says, ever' last mule got out o' the corral an' led off his saddle-hawss, too, so he couldn't go chase 'em back. Ben Dyer, the driver, he reckoned he'd go on. An' about then the' come a bunch o' shots back in the mesquite an' some howlin' fit to raise a body's scalp, Ben says afterward.

"They all hightailed it out back to see what was the row about—yeh, even Slim Church, the shotgun man. Couldn't find a blame thing. Come back to the stage an' it was all right, but when Ben Dyer was aimin' to push on, one o' the mules was so lame he see he couldn't make them grades between Tress Huerfanos an' Atajo, yere. Nothin' to do but bed down with Billy at the station-house. Ben Dyer, he was shore peevish, too. Slim Church, he never liked the idee none, either. An' Ben, he told Billy Bowers—Marie's brother, yuh sabe—that the whole blame' business was goin' to git Billy's job, if whut Ben Dyer could say'd git it.

"Well, Ben says they et supper in the house—it sets on the front face o' the corral, yuh see, with a five-foot high 'dobe wall joinin' onto it an' inclosin' the corral—an' all turned in early. Slim an' Ben, they brung in the treasure an' Slim, he laid down alongside it with his sawed-off Winchester riot-gun by him.

"Ben Dyer says he woke up onct an' the' was a li'l moonlight an' he could see Billy's bunk was empty. Wondered about it fer a minute, but he could hear Slim a-snorin' away, so he figgered ever'thing's all right an' mebbe Billy was outside a-lookin' fer the mules or somethin'. So he went to sleep an' he never woke up ag'in till a sort o' thud roused him. He says he come wide-awake just like somebody'd yelled in his ear that he was about to git killed!"

"Wait a minute," grunted Ware, who found himself keenly interested in the recital of this mystery. "Where's the holster all this time? How-come the's no holster there?"

"He'd got mad that very day an' rode off, Billy told 'em when they come up. He says he'd told the Mex he was goin' to git him fired an' the Mex went right on off. An' the Mex tells the same story. A'right. Ben says Billy's standin' on the floor clost to his bunk; standin' right still. Ben listened an' first thing that struck him was that he couldn't hear Slim Church a-snorin' no more. Well, then, he figgered Slim was listenin', too. But right then, acrost the wooden floor that was lit up by a li'l patch o' moonlight from the door, he happened to see a tongue o' red cre-epin'——"

"God!" breathed Marie Bowers and caught her lip between her teeth.

"He struck a match an'—Slim Church was lyin' in a pool o' blood an' the gold was gone slicker'n a whistle! He saw somethin' else, too: clost to Billy's socked foot was the butcherknife that belonged to the station; that'd been hangin' on the back wall when they had supper. Ben says he noticed the knife partic'lar on account o' the' not bein' much left o' the blade—not more'n a third-inch wide, it wasn't—an' bein' sharp's a needle.

"Ben took one look at Billy. Says the boy was white's a sheet. Then he swung his gun-muzzle onto Billy an' tied him up right then. Went out an' hitched up his mules. Lame or no lame, he was comin' in to Atajo. An', sir, when he come to look at that lame mule ag'in closter, he found a

horsehair tied around the blame' mule's laig, right around the cannon-bone! No wonder he'd gone lame!"

"HADN'T been lame before, o' course," nodded Ware, with narrowed eyes showing their greenish war-flame, forgetting, in the consideration of the crime, the human element represented here by Marie Bowers, who watched him with expression of blended hope and fear. "Kind o' makes it open-an'-shut: somebody wanted that stage to stay overnight at the station, a'right: mules let out; shots back behind to let somebody have a chance to lame a mule."

"That's whut the county attorney says, when he was examinin' Billy yere. Billy, he just says he do'know how-come. He woke up when he heerd a noise an' saw Ben Dyer standin' up with a gun in his paw. Never noticed Slim Church, or the money bein' gone, till Ben struck a match."

"Sher'ff find anything?"

"Nary thing! The's loose sand, yuh see, all around the station at Tres Huerfanos; wind'd smoothed any tracks the' might've been. Yuh see, they figger Billy, he done the killin' an' packed out the gold to somebody waitin' with pack-animals. An' that's why Manuel Ortiz, he's in jail along o' Billy—Manuel bein' the hostler Billy says quit that very day. Albright, the county attorney, he's 'reconstructed the crime,' like he puts it.

"He figgers Billy an' Manuel framed the job. Manuel done the shootin' out back, then hightailed it. Come around an' lamed a mule an' rambled. That night Billy packed the bars out to where Manuel was waitin' with a couple stage-mules an' they loaded the gold an' Manuel took her off an' hid it, then come on into town. Billy killed Slim fer fear he'd wake up shootin'."

"He didn't do it! He couldn't have done it!" cried the girl suddenly. "I know him better than anyone in the world knows him. And I know that a cold-blooded crime like that just isn't in him. He might kill a man in a quarrel, but to deliberately knife Mr. Church, in order to rob him—I know he didn't; couldn't have!"

"It's mighty hard on Marie, yere," said Curly Harter. "That's why I've dragged yuh into the deal, Ware. When I see that Mex outfit o' yo's comin' into town, I thought to myself: looks kind o' like predestinatin', she does! Yonder comes the slickest li'l ol' puzzle-buster in the Rangers. So I kept yuh talkin' an' listenin' till I could send word over to Marie.

"She's all by herself, now, Ware. Ol' Bill, her pa, he's gone some'r's, an' even if he couldn't do nothin' much towards clearin' up this business, anyhow, he could make her feel like she wasn't packin' the whole load single-harness. But he left Atajo the very day Ben Dyer brought in the stage with Billy tied to her an' Slim Church ridin' inside an' not watchin' the scenery."

"Why d'yuh reckon he never come back?" frowned Ware. "What kind o' work's he been doin'?"

"Prospecting," shrugged the girl. "For a good while he was in partnership with Pegleg, but they didn't find anything and Pegleg says, now, that it was papa's stubbornness that kept them from locating this placer-ground he found alone. He says he wanted to go one way and papa insisted on going over the country around Dos Hermanos instead. He claims that when he finally set his foot down and wouldn't go with papa any longer, papa grew angry and dissolved the partnership. Then, three days later he—Pegleg—found the rich placer."

"When'd they bust up?" grunted Ware quickly.

"Well, they were still partners, so far as I know, when papa left the last time. That was six weeks ago. It was about a week later that Pegleg came in with word of his find, wasn't it, Mr. Harter?"

"Just about," nodded Curly. "G'on, Marie."

"Pegleg told me very little," shrugged the girl. "Most of what I've learned, I had from Mr. Smith, the assayer. Pegleg told him about the disagreement. He says that papa went on off into the wild country around Dos Hermanos and he went—to wherever it was he found the gold."

"Yo' dad often stay out this long?" Ware asked evenly, brown face blank.

"No-o, this is a little more than he ever stayed away, before. Still, that is easily explained by the wild nature of the country he went into. And he had plenty of sup-

plies. But I need him so, Mr. Ware. Mr. Harter and his wife have been wonderfully kind and helpful, but papa ought to be here to stand by Billy. Everyone believes him guilty; aside from Mr. Harter, you don't hear a kindly word about the boy. You might think that he'd always worn a brand of some sort!"

"Way o' the world!" shrugged Ware. "Well, I do'know. She does look sort o' snarled up. O' course, this old devil, Pegleg, he ain't offered to help yuh-all none, now that he's got so much?"

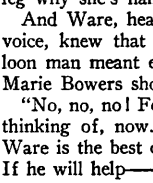
To his surprise—and apparently to the surprise of Curly Harter, as well—a flood of color rose to stain the girl's smooth throat and face. She dropped her eyes swiftly; her red lips trembled. Then, catching hold of herself again, she looked up at Ware and shook her head vehemently.

"He—won't help. I—talked to him—this morning."

"Listen!" began Curly Harter. "What did that ol' tarant'ler say to yuh? If he made ary bit o' talk yuh never liked, why—I'll git that double-barrel' Greener off my wall an' I'll shore make it plain to Pegleg why she's named 'Angel-Maker.'"

And Ware, hearing his slow, thickened voice, knew that the grizzled, kindly saloon man meant every word he said. But Marie Bowers shook her head swiftly.

"No, no, no! Forget him! It's Billy I'm thinking of, now. And as you said, Mr. Ware is the best detective in the Rangers. If he will help——"



OUT of the door Pegleg came lurching, the rough two-by-four that served him as artificial left leg clumping weirdly on the floor planks. As he came abreast of the trio his tiny, bloodshot black eyes bored into each face in turn. He stopped beside them and beneath straggling, mustard-gray mustache thick lips parted malevolently in a snarling grin that showed yellow fangs.

"So ye're the Ranger, are ye!" he greeted Ware sneeringly. "Well, they sho' do git a lot o' nice li'l Sunday school mamma's boys onto the fo'ce these days."

Ware merely eyed him steadily, no flicker of expression showing on his lean face. Apparently Pegleg was emboldened by this stillness. Up and down he looked Ware, from wide Mexican sombrero to the polished boots showing beneath the wide bottoms of the *charro* trousers. Then eloquently he spat, missing Ware's feet by no more than the fraction of an inch.

"Fella," drawled Ware, "yuh git! An' next time yuh see me, pull clear around a buildin' an' take the other side where I can't see yuh a-tall! For if yuh don't, I am goin' to make yuh break down the timber howlin' like a scared pup—a yaller one!"

"Whut!" snarled Pegleg. "Ye——"

His hand flashed up to his neck; slipped around it. A long-bladed bowie appeared from its sheath between his shoulder blades.

Ware's hand shot out; he rapped the wrist of the knife-hand sharply with the hard edge of his palm, caught the falling knife neatly with a boot-toe and sent it spinning through the air into the street. Before Pegleg had moved again, Ware snatched off the old killer's own hat and with it began to slap his face. Back and back Pegleg gave, but even in his fury—evidenced by the terrific profanity that was punctuated by the *slap-slap-slap* of the hatbrim—he made no move toward the gun at his hip. Evidently, as Curly Harter had said, he was not particularly a six-gun man.

At the edge of the veranda he stumbled and Ware dropped the hat and seized him by shoulder and pants-leg. He lifted him with a swift jerk and hurled him bodily into the sandy street, almost under the hoofs of two horses the riders of which had pulled up to gape at the spectacle. The horses went into a paroxysm of bucking, and from the swirling dust-cloud came the fierce oaths of the riders addressed to their mounts mingled with the shrill yells of Pegleg, who was rolling over and over to escape the flashing hoofs.

Curly Harter leaned against the wall with hands clasped to his sides and gasped brokenly, tears running down his cheeks. Even Marie Bowers showed a small gleam of amusement, but as Ware returned with solemn face she regarded him anxiously, expectantly.

"Reckon I'll drift down to the jail a spell," he shrugged. "No, don't need com-

pany. Want to augur a li'l bit with yo' brother, Miss Marie, an' I reckon I'll think better if I lone wolf it."

"Watch out for Pegleg!" Curly Harter warned him with swift return to gravity. "He was skeered to go after his short gun, but he'll shore bushwhack yuh sudden an' do her right yere in town, first chanct he gits."

"Yuh might tell him for me that if he does try bushwhackin' me, he better make a center shot. For if he misses, I'm comin' after him an' comin' smokin'. An' that goes even if she looks like he maybe mightn't have done it."

"I'll tell him!" Curly nodded with grim smile. "I'll tell him before all hands an' the cook, with heaps o' pleasure. Now, jail's down yonder at the end o' the street."

"I'll walk a little way with you, Mr. Ware," Marie Bowers said quietly. "Our house is just this side of the jail."

So, while Curly Harter turned back to the saloon door, Ware and the girl went together along the line of wooden galleries, or verandas, that made a sort of roofed sidewalk to the main street of El Atajo.

"What'd Pegleg offer to do—bring in the real murderer, or bust into the jail an' let yo' brother out?" inquired Ware thoughtfully, after a few steps.

"How did you know that?" she cried amazedly, stopping to stare at him.

"Why," shrugged Ware, with a twinkle of amusement in his green eyes, "he could hardly offer to do anything but one o' those things. An', o' course, he made his proposition in a way that riled yuh—anybody could tell that."

"He—he made his help conditional; he said that he'd help me if—if I'd marry him!"

"So I figured," nodded Ware dryly. "This-here the assay place? Silent Smith's?"

"Yes. That's some of the Pegleg gold in that scale-pan; nuggets and dust. Mr. Smith said that he put it out so that someone wouldn't be breaking into his house and wrecking it to see what the gold looked like. A lot of the men here said, at first, that they could tell where the gold came from by looking at it. But apparently that was a mistaken idea; nobody has seen any difference in this."

WARE stared through the grimy little window at the litter of objects strewn helter-skelter over the floor of Silent Smith's small showcase. There was pinchbeck jewelry and a row of watches, beside the old scale pan in which lay yellow nuggets and coarse dust, the whole labeled "Pegleg Gold."

"Yuh talk a good deal to this-here Smith, don't yuh?" asked Ware, turning his eyes suddenly on the girl.

"Why—yes!" she said slowly, flushing once more. "Mr. Smith is—very kind. If he can help Billy, I know he will."

"Same terms as Pegleg's?" Ware's tone was dry.

"Why—I suppose I have to tell you everything, Mr. Ware, so—Mr. Smith has asked me to marry him, but he hasn't made my consent a condition of a bargain."

"Goin' to marry him?" persisted Ware. "If yuh are—when? Only if he gits yo' brother clear or beforehand?"

Again she stared at him amazedly and he knew that his feeling had been correct; both Pegleg and Silent Smith wanted this girl—and small wonder! Each in his own way was trying to persuade her to marry him. Smith, though, as might have been expected, was playing the more skilful game.

"I—don't know. If you hadn't come and offered to help, why—I would have married Mr. Smith tomorrow!" she finished the halting confession with a rush.

"Um-hmm! D' yuh really want to marry him?"

"He's pleasant; I—I like him very well, but—of course I don't! What girl would want to marry a man more than twice her age? But I've been desperate; absolutely at my wits' ends. My little brother to be hanged——"

"Don't yuh worry!" Ware said abruptly, though with the words he knew that he had no business making promises that perhaps he couldn't fulfill. "Yo' brother won't be—won't be found guilty. An' yuh won't have to marry Smith tomorrow or any day!"

"Do you really promise that?" she cried. "Oh—I believe you and——"

Somehow, instantly, strain seemed to

leave her. And for the first time he saw the real Marie Bowers, as she must have looked before her brother's arrest. Into her eyes crept amusement and—something else.

"Is this—this help of yours contingent upon—the same condition as that of the others?" she asked, looking up sidelong.

Ware's face went furiously red as ever a girl's could be. He stared blankly at her and she regarded him with widened eyes.

"Why, I didn't know a man could blush like that!" she said. "I—I'm sorry!"

"Not a bit!" he told her violently. "I'm a Ranger an' a Ranger's got no more business with a wife than a pig has got with a white collar! But I don't mind tellin' yuh that if things wasn't like that, why, I do'know what I'd say."

A big square-shouldered man had appeared soundlessly in the door of the little office, three or four feet to their left. Ware saw him instantly and he wondered how much this white, still-faced man had heard of their exchange before the window. But he revealed nothing of his thoughts as he studied the assayer-jeweler of Atajo.

"Mr. Smith!" cried the girl nervously. "This is Mr. Ware, of the Rangers."

Both men nodded without speaking. Then Ware touched his sombrero rim.

"Got to go," he grunted. " 'By."

HE LEFT Marie standing beside the assayer and himself went to the sheriff's office in the squat adobe jail. To the sheriff he introduced himself—his name was all that was needed—and asked about the charges against Billy Bowers.

"It's hell," shrugged the sheriff. "I wisht somebody else had my job fer a spell. Fer he's goin' to be found guilty an' I'm goin' have to hang the kid. No two ways about it. I ain't got a thing ag'inst him an' I like the ol' man an' the gal. But as shore as yuh're a foot high an' able to take nourishment, Billy knifed Slim Church an' passed out the gold to his Mex pal."

"Does look thataway," nodded Ware, with eyes on the floor. "Still—circumstantial ev'dence is kind o' tricky. Damned if I'd hang a man on it."

"In which yuh're shore different from ary jury that'll try Billy!" the sheriff assured him grimly. "Atajo County'll find him guilty without leavin' the jury box."

"Mind if I see him? His sister asked me to kind o' look around an' try to put a loop over somethin' that hasn't been found."

"Son," said the sheriff a little scornfully, "yuh got quite a rep', I know, but all the fancywork in the world ain't goin' to make black white. Shore yuh can see him, but he's turned sulky last week or so. Sits over in a corner o' his cell an' just sulks."

He got up and led the way through a sheet-iron door into a gloomy corridor between two rows of three iron cages each. At the far end, where light came into the jail through small loop-holes high in the end wall, Ware saw a slim figure upon a cot, moveless as a dead man.

"Billy!" called the sheriff. "Yere's a Texas Ranger come to look yuh over."

"Go to hell!" a faint snarl from the cot answered him.

"Now, Billy, son, yuh don't want to act thataway! Come on an' talk to him."

No sound from the cot, nor any move. Ware moved to the cell-end.

"Listen to me, fella!" he snapped. "I come here to hear yuh say one thing. Now, d'yuh want me to have to come inside an' shake yuh to make yuh talk? I'm askin' yuh just one question an' I'm askin' it fair an' square, not givin' a dam' about the ev'dence the sher'ff's got. Did yuh do it?"

"No," came the apathetic denial from the boy. "But what's the use of talking. They'll hang me just the same."

"They promised him life if he'd plead guilty an' tell 'em where the money is," the sheriff told Ware in an undertone. "But he wouldn't!"

"Where's the Mex hostler? Like to talk to him—an' by myself, if yuh don't mind, Sher'ff. He's likely scared o' yuh an' I can sling Mex like a *pela'o.*"

"Well, if yuh don't want me to hear, o' course, I don't want to butt in!" shrugged the sheriff somewhat peevishly. "I'll put yuh in the cell with him an' lock yuh in. Yuh can call when yuh want out."

He unlocked a cell nearer the front and Ware stepped inside. A squat shape reared up in a corner and the door clanged to behind Ware.

"Manuel?" said Ware, when the sheriff had gone out into his office. "I am that

Ranger called Ware. Perhaps you have heard my name?"

"*Sí*, señor," grunted the Mexican calmly. "I have heard much of you."

"Very well! Now, I have come to say that, in my opinion, you are a he-mule of great stubbornness—and of a foolishness as great. Why should you hang with that boy yonder?"

"Why, because the sheriff will hang me," replied Manuel with a touch of grim humor. "Certainly it is not because of any fondness of mine for the death—for any death just now."

"Perhaps I can show you how to slap aside the rope."

"I shall be pleased, but I think that is not possible."

"Certainly it is possible—and simple! That is, if you will be truthful with me. Mind, I do not promise you complete freedom. But escape from the rope I do promise you—and money for your family."

"How?" inquired the Mexican eagerly. "But tell me, señor!"

"Tell me where you hid the money—the gold—and I promise you that you will receive but a prison sentence and that half of the reward offered by the stage company will be paid to your family."

"I feared that!" grunted Manuel. "Feared that your offer was made with belief that I helped to steal the gold. And I knew nothing of it, being very drunk that night and lying on the desert north of this town. Perhaps the boy, Billee, killed the guard and with someone's help stole the gold. I do not think so, knowing him. But perhaps he did. If so, it was without my help."

Even in the darkness, his fatalistic shrug was plain.

"So, señor, I fear that I will hang. Will you have a cigarette? The señorita is most kind; but for her I could not smoke."

WARE stood up with polite refusal and called to the sheriff. Outside, the officer regarded him, at first curiously, then with a shade of malice.

"Clear it all up?"

"Tried to make him tell where he'd hid the gold," shrugged Ware. "But he says he do'know a thing about the robbery."

"Kind o' disappointin', huh?" grinned the sheriff.

Ware lifted a shoulder, with small enigmatic smile.

"Does kind o' shut one trail," he nodded. "Well, thanks; see yuh some more."

He went out and quietly back toward the assayer's. Marie was not visible, nor was Pegleg. He was a good deal more curious about the old killer's whereabouts than about those of the girl, and he kept alert watch for token of Pegleg as he walked.

"Wonder if I can turn the trick," he muttered to himself. "No doubt in my mind about it. Trouble with these people here, they see these things a' right, but they don't look at 'em in connection with other things."

And so he turned into the dusky door of Silent Smith's place and found himself in an empty front room which looked as if it had never known the touch of a broom. Cobwebs rounded every corner of the leprous gray ceiling. A dusty and ancient showcase was on one side of the room, its contents barely visible through the grimy curved glass. Along the other wall were mineral specimens heaped upon the floor.

"Hey!" called Ware and the greenish war flame was very bright in his eyes now. "Hey, Smith!"

Came a startled-seeming grunt from the dusk of the back room. Ware slid like a cat to the door and peered through. There was the squat figure of the assayer, half-stooping over some apparatus in the rear, his white face gleaming in the dusk as he stared toward Ware.

"Can I come back?" asked Ware tonelessly. "Want to augur with yuh a spell."

Smith made a wordless growling sound of negation and came hastily forward. Ware stepped back and so they faced each other in the dirty front room. The assayer was blank of face; Ware, save for the light that made of his eyes twin bits of hard jade, was utterly impassive, also.

"Yes?" said Smith.

"Lady told yuh I was a Ranger. Now, I'm tellin' yuh that—the jig's up. Looks like yuh'd have figured that ever'body wasn't such a blame fool as the sher'ff an' county attorney. Yuh ought've sort o' set back in the breechin' an' kept old Pegleg

from blowin' money right here."

"What d'you mean?" Smith said evenly. "Are you crazy?"

"If folks around Atajo are in their right minds, then I shore am!" grinned Ware. "To be hornswoggled by so plain an' simple a deal as yo's an' Pegleg's. Hell! All I needed to know was that Billy Bowers never done the murder an' robbery an' I could see who did. Pegleg slipped in an' lamed the mule; then that night he waited outside an' yuh packed out the bars to him; yuh knifed Slim Church when he roused up. Then yuh brought in the bars, melted 'em up an' put some nuggets an' dust out o' yo' safe in yo' window.

"I reckon—" thus Ware in indifferent tone, after a long minute of silence, in which Smith's face still did not change—"we won't need to cuff yuh. Pegleg was different; the old sidewinder like to chewed off the sher'ff's hand before we got him started to the jail. But—shucks! These killers that bust down when yuh swing a rope in their faces, they gi' me a pain! Pegleg, just for instance. Bust down an' spilled the whole tale. An' he wants to turn State's ev'dence an' hang yuh, Smith. Oh, yuh're in a jackpot, a' right!"

Inwardly, he cursed. He had not the slightest evidence against either Pegleg or Smith. No matter how certainly he had convicted them by remorseless logic of this crime—and guessed that Pegleg had also murdered the elder Bowers for some reason or other—he could not prove his charges before a jury unless he forced this tallowy-faced, self-controlled man to crack. And Smith merely watched him.

He turned his head slightly, as if hearing a sound from the street door; as if forgetful of his prisoner, moved a half step in that direction, offering the back of his head and the side of his body to Smith. It was a desperate game he played, and with eyes wide open he took every chance.

OUT of the tail of his eye he caught the flash of movement that told him he had won: that Smith had cracked. He skated sideway and his arms moved in the flashing cross-hand draw that brought twin Colts out like snake-heads from a hole. But before he could fire there sounded the terrific roar of a shot that set his ears ringing, and a bullet sang close by. He whirled and drove a bullet through the street door, another at Silent Smith, who was swaying on his feet with a double-barreled .41 derringer in each hand.

Pegleg came crashing inside, his heavy Winchester rifle clattering on the plank floor. He coughed once and—like the sidewinder Curly Harter had called him—his body moved in a writhing, curling loop, then straightened. Smith, with the bullets of both Pegleg and Ware through his body, slumped on suddenly hinged knees. But on the floor he lifted himself painfully, propping himself up on one hand; feebly he lifted a derringer—and pointed it at Pegleg!

"You dam' squealer!" he breathed.

Ware kicked the weapon out of his hand and regarded them both. Running footsteps sounded outside; the door was suddenly thronged.

"Yere! Le' me inside! Out o' the way!" the sheriff bellowed.

He came pushing in with a gun in each hand. He gaped down at Pegleg, on whom he had almost stepped, then over at Smith, who was breathing in bubbling groans.

"What d'yuh call this, anyhow?" he demanded of Ware.

"Put yo' guns down, mister!" Ware told him quietly. "Yuh don't need 'em for these fellas, I reckon, an'—they wouldn't do yuh much good with me!"

Something in the contemptuous expression with which he regarded the sheriff seemed to penetrate that worthy's consciousness. He reholstered his weapons mechanically and slowly his hand went up to rub his head.

"Never thought, did yuh, to hook up the disappearance o' three bars o' gold with Pegleg's mysterious mine?" Ware's drawl bit like a whiplash. "Yuh just took things as they come in downright good faith. Somebody'd accused Billy Bowers o' murder an' robbery, so yuh figured he must be guilty. An' Pegleg, he says he found a mine, so—he must've done just that. An' Smith, here, he shakes a couple nuggets in yo' face, so they must be from Pegleg's mine, like he says.

"Still, I reckon the's worse sher'ffs, at

that. I heard about one down in the Big Bend that was worse—he was ninety year old an' had just one arm! Yuh'll find the famous Pegleg Mine in that backroom, underneath that brick furnace table. I'll lay a bet on that, even if I never saw it. But Smith was tinkerin' there when I come in an' he like to throwed a fit when I wanted to come back."

Several citizens dashed through into the dirt-floored rear room and a whoop attended the lifting up of one and a half heavy gold bars from the cavity at the table's foot.

"Now, le's manhandle Pegleg a minute!" snapped Ware.

He bent and shook the prostrate figure; made swift demand for a flask and when one was handed him, poured whisky down the dying man's throat.

"What'd yuh kill Old Man Bowers for?" he snapped roughly, when Pegleg opened his eyes. "What'd yuh kill him for? Answer up or I'll take the hide off yuh with yo' own knife!"

He jerked the weapon from its sheath and brandished it before Pegleg's eyes. But the old man grinned ferally at him; weakly gestured with one hand.

"I'm goin' out, so I just as soon tell ye-all ever'thing. Ye're a pack o' jugheads! Ye couldn't, none o' ye, find either end o' yo'selves in the dark! I pulled it over ever' one o' ye but this-yere li'l devil, an' I dam' near got him from the door.

"I got the gold out o' the station an' nobody never helped me, neither! Ol' Pegleg, he never needed no help! I let out the mules from the corral. Then I let go a couple shots out back an' a couple howls an' 'loped around front an' put a tail hair onto a mule. I could've took the bars then. That night I sneaked in an' got the bars an' loaded 'em onto a pack mule. Slim Church never stirred, but him an' me'd had words, so I give him his ticket with the station butcherknife!

"Silent, he melted up a bar an' gi' me money. An' I laughed at ye the whole time. Bunch o' jugheads! None o' ye could git into a crazy asylum without takin' a college course! This Ranger—bend down, feller; I'm goin' an' I got somethin' to tell ye first. Ye're the only'n'——"

WARE bent, then suddenly flung himself sideway and the knife which Pegleg had snatched up from the floor whipped past him narrowly. Pegleg slumped and the knife dropped. Ware kicked it aside and poured more whisky down Pegleg.

"Why'd yuh kill Old Man Bowers?" he repeated, and the thick lips curled.

"He come—a day sooner'n I expected him. Caught me with the bars. Couldn't let him git away. Soon's he heerd about the robbery— So I drilled him—over by Signal Rock. Ye—blame'—jugheads——"

So he died like the vicious old sidewinder he was. Ware stood up and regarded the sheriff. That official looked at the floor and up at the ceiling.

"Well," he said slowly, "ain't nothin' like hearin' the Almighty's truth about yo'se'f, I reckon. An' we shore done just that today. Ranger, I reckon Atajo County sort o' owes yuh one. How yuh figgered it, I do'know. But I see we ought to've guessed it, too."

"It's nothin'," shrugged Ware. "Reckon yuh can handle things a' right. Goin' to be hard on the girl, though; gittin' her brother back, but hearin' about her pa."

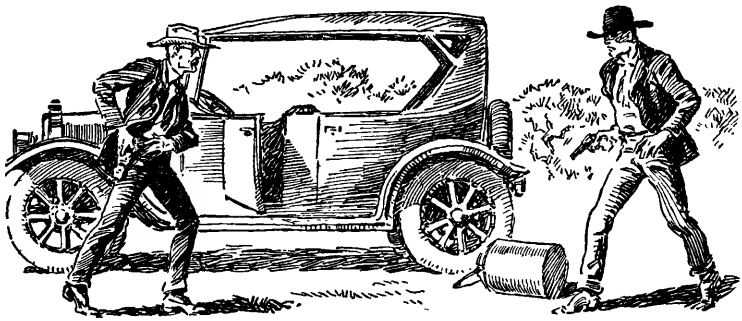
He was nearest the door. He lifted his head now, a little, then moved swiftly toward the rear room, the crowd giving way before him. He was slipping through the back door, preparatory to streaking it along the rear of the buildings to the hitch rack where Rocket waited, when he heard Marie Bowers' voice asking for him.

"Why, he stepped out back a minute, Miss Marie," the sheriff answered her. "I reckon he'll be back in a shake. Yuh better not come in, right now."

"Yeh, I'll be back—I bet!" grunted Ware to himself, when he was in the saddle and had swung Rocket's head toward the out-trail. "Yeh, I will not—so long's the's no law against ridin' around this town!"

He spurred on, with head lowered; suddenly he laughed outright.

"Still—she was about the purtiest thing I ever see walkin'. An' if I'd wanted to take her up on that proposition —Rocket, honest, yuh just do'know how close yuh come, today, to havin' a stepma!"



DAD STREETER, OCULIST

By FRED HUNT

Author of "Dad Streeter, Underwriter" and "The Killing of Sam Blakeman"

With his weakened eyes failing him, political enemies crowding him, and a swift-gunned killer clamoring for his blood, old Sheriff Logan backed against the wall and prepared to meet the end with his boots on

DAD STREETER, leaning back in his hickory-bottomed chair while the afternoon sun streamed through the window of his one-room shack, eyed a table full of dirty dishes with distinct antipathy. Dishwashing was the bane of the old frontiersman's housework; something to be ignored with high scorn until his supply of cracked china and worn silverware was completely exhausted. This usually happened at the end of the fifth or sixth meal.

"Wal, I'll have to do a heap of scourin' if I calculate on gettin' any supper," was his rueful admission. He had almost reached the point of searching for his patched gingham apron when the thump of the evening paper at his front door provided ample excuse for further procrastination.

Retrieving the paper with alacrity surprising for his years, he once more settled his long, attenuated frame in the rickety chair, hoisted his ornate, high-heeled boots to a place of honor amongst the soiled dishes, pulled his reading glasses down from his forehead, and unfolded the *Herald*.

NIGHT HAWK CHALLENGES SHERIFF TO DUEL

The black bold-face letters of an eight-column streamer seemed to leap from the front page to greet the old borderman. His piercing gray eyes, peeping out from beneath shaggy brows, skimmed over the first few lines of the story.

Sheriff Melvin Logan this morning received a written challenge to a revolver duel from the Night Hawk, the mysterious desperado who has terrorized the outlying districts of the county for the past four months. The nocturnal marauder, who thus far has scoffed openly at all attempts made by county peace officers to apprehend him, invites the aged sheriff "to shoot it out man to man" with him tomorrow afternoon at a desolate spot down the beach.

The story, which assumed the character of an editorial attack on the old sheriff, went on to point out that Logan, now in his sixty-seventh year and serving his ninth two-year term in office, was a candidate to succeed himself at the nearing election in spite of the evident fact that he had revealed himself to be pathetically

unable to cope with the present reign of lawlessness. As a timely supplement to the news story, the paper carried a regular editorial supporting the candidacy of Ed Styles, the senior deputy who was running against his chief.

Streeter finished reading the article, pushed his spectacles up on his forehead and let the newspaper slide unnoticed from a bony knee. His slender brown fingers mechanically rolled a cigarette. Deftly striking a match on his thumbnail, he lighted it. He inhaled deeply, with slow, clock-like regularity. Gazing vacantly through the open window, his fine old eyes became fixed on the distant horizon of the Gulf of Mexico, which curled at the edges of his little homestead.

His mind wandered back through the years to that night down in Sonora. He could see it all again, happening right before his eyes: his six-shooter empty, a bullet in his arm, the greasers closing in on him, their knives flashing. And then Mel Logan—Young Mel, it was then—gliding through the swinging doors of the saloon, his six-gun out, and muttering, "Guess I'll take a hand in this little game."

At the end of an hour, when his lap was covered with tobacco crumbs and ashes and the floor flecked with cigarette stubs, the old frontiersman rose slowly to his full six feet two, stretched his creaking joints and reached for his worn sombrero.

"And now time's come for me to take a hand in Mel's little game. I'll jes' ease down and drop in on him, unexpected like, and talk things over. An' I reckon I can get a snack sommers down-town and then I won't have to wash them plegged dishes until tomorrow." He gave the dirty dishes a final malevolent glare as he went out the door.

SHADOWS of late afternoon were lengthening when Dad's battered flivver rattled to a stop in front of the yellow brick courthouse. The old frontiersman walked slowly around to a side door, entered and sauntered along the corridor until he came to the sheriff's office. He strolled in.

"Howdy, Dad!"

"Howdy, Mel. Jes' dropped in for a minute. See the help has gone for the day."

"Yep, the boys have gone home. I was just reddin' up my desk a mite before lockin' up and headin' for home myself. Have a chair, Dad."

"Thanks, reckon it won't hurt none if I do."

Streeter sat down, tilted the chair back on two legs, crossed his fancy boots on the top of a waste basket and cuffed his broad-brimmed Stetson to the back of his head. His keen gray eyes scrutinized the face of the veteran sheriff.

Logan pushed a clutter of papers to the rear of his big desk, pulled down the roll top and turned the key. He seemed a little nervous under the steady gaze of his visitor.

"How's things with you, Dad?" he asked rather abruptly, turning a pair of faded blue eyes on his friend and fidgeting slightly in his chair.

"Oh, so so. Same as they've been for the past ten year. Readin' newspapers and magazines and doin' housework ain't very excitin'."

"Better quit bachin' and get married again," the sheriff forced a bantering laugh.

"Listen, Mel," there was a tense seriousness in the old frontiersman's voice now, "I ain't here to discuss holy matrimony. I'm here to inquire how yo're gettin' along."

The mock smile vanished quickly from the elderly sheriff's thin face. Into his dim, clouded eyes crept the look of a man who realizes he is almost at the end of his tether. Viewing the white drooping mustache, the thinning silver hair, the pale, wan skin on the gaunt, drawn face, Streeter thought to himself that his old friend had aged ten years during the past few months.

"Well, Dad, you and me have been knowin' each other too many years to try to fool you. I reckon you know my troubles as well as I do. Leastwise the newspapers ain't leavin' much to imagination."

"That true about that challenge I saw in the *Herald* this evening?"

"Reckon it is. Here's the letter itself."

Streeter fished his glasses out of his vest pocket and read the letter from beginning to end.

"Wal, what you goin' to do about it?" Streeter put the question, but knowing his old friend as he did, he also knew the answer. He saw the back-to-the-wall defiant glare flash into the dim old eyes, like the last flickering flames of a dying campfire.

"Same as you'd do. I'm goin' after him."

"How about takin' a couple of deputies with you?" suggested Streeter.

"Nope. That won't do. I'll be a damned sight older than I am now before I sidestep any personal invitations like this. And then, as he says in the letter, I won't find him unless I come alone."

"Look here, Mel," Streeter spoke sternly. "You know and I know that it's simple suicide for you. Yore eyes ain't up to no gunplay. That's true, ain't it?"

"Yes," the aged sheriff reluctantly admitted.

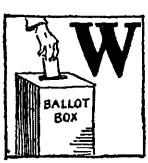
"Now, jes how bad are they?"

"To be honest, Dad, I can't recognize my best friend from here to the other end of this room," Logan confided.

"Great God, Mel! And you a-fixin' to go after that there hombre!"

"I got to, Dad," was the simple explanation of the sheriff.

"Yeh, and I know why, too. For sixty odd year no man ever bluffed Mel Logan, and you figger it's too late to start in now," Streeter hurled the accusation at his old friend.



WELL, that's part of the story," admitted the veteran officer. "But there's another angle, too. If I don't go my political enemies will make a howl about it and it'll mean sure defeat at the polls next week, for I ain't any too strong now. And unless I get another term I won't be eligible for that half-pay pension the county gives to twenty-year officials, and God knows I got to get it. What with sickness and bad cattle deals in recent years, we've been wiped clean save for the little cottage. I've been figuring on making it twenty years and then steppin' aside and letting a younger man take my place."

"Younger man, me gizzard!" snorted Streeter. "Outside the politicians and the underworld here you'd be holdin' office twenty year from now. And you know as well as me why they want to get rid of you. That dope ring is at the bottom of the hull thing. They can't make money as long as yo're in office. There's millions in that business, Mel. There's no doubt in my mind but what Texopolis is headquarters of the gang that's supplyin' the hull Southwest with narcotics. Without you, the Federal officers ain't got no chance of stoppin' 'em and sartin good citizens—both you and me's got a purty good idear who they are, too—would soon be rich men, if they ain't already."

"Yes, I've fought that gang tooth and toenail for several years, and now I've got 'em licked, or fairly well in check, anyway," admitted Logan.

"An' jes' between you and me, Mel, I got a notion there's a purtty close connection between that dope ring and this here Night Hawk party. Accordin' to my way of thinkin', that hombre ain't nuthin' but a tool used by them to get you out of the way. An' they don't care much whether you lose out in the election or get bumped off by this gun-toter."

"I've been putting two and two together and getting four, too, Dad," was the old sheriff's answer.

"And this here Ed Styles," Streeter went on, lowering his voice a bit. "You ain't got nothin' on him, but you know and I know he's crooked. And he's got friends who ain't dead set on breakin' up the dope traffic."

"We think alike, Dad, but I ain't insinuatin' anythin' I can't prove in court. They've got me where they want me. But I've got to go after that feller, and I'm goin' alone!" There was a quiet determination in the officer's words which Streeter knew no argument would ever shake.

For several minutes the two men sat in silence, while Streeter rolled a cigarette.

"How many know yore eyes are bad as they are, Mel?" suddenly asked Streeter.

"Let me see. There's my eye-doctor, and you and Ed Styles and—I guess that's about all."

"Ed know jes' how bad they are?" pressed Streeter.

"I think I've mentioned to him in an offhand way that they've been ailin' for a while. Probably he's got an idear I can't shoot like I used to, but don't guess he knows I couldn't hit a man at ten paces with a sawed-off shotgun."

Again there was silence. Dad Streeter turned out another cigarette and lighted it on the butt of the first one. The last slanting rays of the setting sun climbed up the wall in a final burst of brilliance, and then were blotted out. The short, Southern twilight lingered but a few brief moments, and the darkness of night entered the sheriff's office to find two old men sitting there in eerie stillness. At last Streeter spoke.

"I got an idear, Mel. You 'phone Mollie you won't be home 'til late, and then come over to the Lone Star House and I'll explain it to you while we're havin' a snack."

The sheriff found his hat and coat without turning on the light, buckled on his belt and six-shoother and they tramped out the building arm in arm, the deserted corridors echoing their slow footsteps.

DAD STREETER rose early the next morning, washed just enough dishes for breakfast, ate heartily of bacon and eggs, glanced at the paper, and then became a very busy man.

Procuring a cardboard regulation revolver target from behind a stack of magazines, he went to the beach on the rear of his property and tacked the target to a board which he planted in the loose sand. Measuring off twenty-five paces, he turned, drew his six-shooter, took quick aim and fired. Lowering his gun, he waited until the thin blue veil of smoke blew away, and then squinted at the target.

"Can't see no hole, but better eyes than mine might," he muttered.

Going forward, he found the bullet had penetrated the white cardboard several inches from the bull's-eye.

Again he measured off a range, forty paces this time. Turning around he squinted again at the target.

"Nary a chance for the best eyes in the world to see that hole," he said half aloud, a grin of mischievous satisfaction breaking out on his leathery features.

Bringing up his gun again, Streeter fired four times, taking rather careful aim before each shot. There was a hint of anticipation as he again strode forward to the target. Three shots had punctured the bull's-eye, and the fourth had missed by less than an inch—shooting which two or possibly three other men in Texas might equal, if they were extremely lucky.

Going back to his cabin, the old frontiersman, following the habit of four decades, cleaned and oiled his ivory-handled six-shooter with meticulous thoroughness, slipped fresh shells into the cylinder, and returned it to the holster. He then turned his attention to his cigarettes and magazines.

Shortly after the noon hour Streeter strolled into the office of the county sheriff. Only two men, Sheriff Logan and Deputy Sheriff Styles, a dark-visaged, heavy-paunched man of middle age, were in the room.

"Wal, Mel, I reckon yo're goin' after that bad aig this afternoon?" Streeter asked.

"I'm aimin' to, Dad."

"I was jes' a-thinkin', Mel, there's liable to be a bit of gunplay, and it'd be a purtty good idear if you'd come out to my place and have a little target practice before you start out for him. You ain't been put to it much to do any shootin' of late years, and I thought you might be sorta rusty, and wearin' spectacles, too."

The sheriff's face broke into a grin.

"That's kinda funny, Dad," he chuckled. "Since I got to wearing glasses I'm shootin' as well as I was thirty year ago, and you recollect I used to be pretty fair with a six-gun. Only the other day I tried out a few shots in my chicken yard, and I chased a tin can along the ground like it was tied onto the rear end of a honeymoon automobile."

Deputy Sheriff Styles looked up quickly from the paper which he was reading.

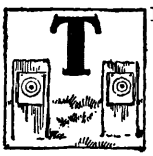
"Wal, that's shore pleasin' to hear, for I had been a-worryin' a mite about this ruckus this afternoon," commented Streeter.

"No need to fret, Dad, for I feel right now like I could swap lead with anybody I ever saw shoot, save yourself, possibly," said the sheriff.

"Thanks for the compliment," returned Streeter. "But anyways, you might come down to my beach and let me see you do some of yore second childhood shootin'. And the practice won't hurt you none."

"By gum, I'll do it," exclaimed Logan; then, turning to his deputy, "Mind runnin' me down to Dad's place, Ed? Leave the office open, for Jim's due back from dinner right away."

"Glad to," responded Styles, quickly, getting his hat and coat.



THIRTY minutes later the three men were on the beach in the rear of Streeter's cabin.

"Want a little practice, Styles?" asked the old borderman. "Got three targets here."

"No, thanks. I'll watch you and the boss blaze away."

"What distance you want to shoot, Mel?" inquired Dad.

"Just to show you what I can do in my second childhood, as you called it, set 'em up at forty paces."

"Purtty long for a six-gun," growled Streeter as he counted off forty steps and stuck the two boards in the sand about four feet apart.

"You know, Mel, I dropped my gun last week on the cement sidewalk. It struck right on the end of the barrel, and I'm shore 'fraid it knocked the sight a little geegaw," explained Streeter as he drew a line in the sand with one heel.

"Now, you old skinflint, don't try to pull any alibi stuff on me," protested Sheriff Logan, a twinkle in his eye.

"Nope. That's straight goods, Mel. And that's one reason I want to try her out to see if she shoots true," insisted Streeter.

"All right, I'll accept your explanation. You shoot fust. We'll make it five shots each. Take the one on the left, Dad, and let 'er smoke."

The old frontiersman toed the line in the sand, raised his gun to the level of his eyes and fired five times, taking deliberate aim before each shot.

"Can't see what I done from here," said Streeter. "You go ahead, Mel, and then we'll trot down and read 'em and one of us can weep."

Sheriff Logan took his place, wiped his spectacles, brought up his gun, and got off his five shots in somewhat less time than was needed by his old friend.

"Wal, come along, old-timer, and see what we done," invited Streeter, motioning for the sheriff to follow him.

Deputy Sheriff Styles, who had been an interested observer from a point behind the firing line, walked briskly forward.

"I'd better take a look-see myself to settle any disputes that might come up between you two," he explained as he overtook Streeter and Logan.

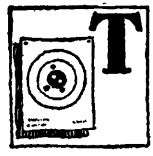
The three men arrived at the targets simultaneously, and stooped down to survey the damage. Styles was the first to straighten up, the first to speak.

"Hellfire!" It was more an oath than an exclamation that dropped from his lips.

Streeter and Logan, still squatting on their haunches before the targets, rose slowly to their feet, looked at each other and grinned foolishly.

"How's that for second childhood shootin', you old reprobate?" demanded the sheriff, his thin, pinched face now glowing with a roguish smile.

Styles stooped quickly and made a second examination of the targets, as if he were unable to believe what his eyes had told him. While there was not a bullet mark on Streeter's target, the one chosen by the old sheriff had two ugly punctures in the bull's-eye and three other holes less than an inch from the black orb. And this had been done at forty paces!



THE deputy sheriff staggered to his feet, swayed uncertainly, and stood looking goggle-eyed at his chief.

"Put 'er there, Mel," drawled Streeter, extending his hand to the sheriff. "Ain't seen better shootin' durin' the past twenty year."

"Thanks, Dad, and now trot out your

alibi," said Logan, grinning from ear to ear and throwing a sly wink at his deputy.

"I ain't got much to say after watchin' you shoot, Mel, but I'm willin' to show you the bright spot on the sight where it landed on the sidewalk, if you want to take a look," returned the old frontiersman.

"No, thanks, I'll take your word for it," said the sheriff, as the three men walked back toward the car.

"What time you going to start after that bird down the beach, Sheriff?" asked the deputy, and there was a trace of uneasiness in his voice.

"Why, tolerable soon, I reckon."

"Want me to drive you down that way?"

"No, I guess I'll get Dad to drive me down in his flivver, and you can take my car back to the office when you go. Think I'll hang around here and chew the rag for about an hour yet," explained the sheriff casually.

"Then I'll be easin' along back to town," said Styles, moving toward the car.

"Better come in and have a drink with Mel and me, Deputy," suggested Streeter.

Styles hesitated momentarily, then turned and followed the other two men into the cabin.

As soon as the two visitors were seated, Streeter sat out glasses and then excused himself, explaining that he had to step outside to get the ingredients. Before he returned to dispense hospitality, he drained the gas tank in the sheriff's car of all save some two quarts of gasoline. Styles departed after one drink.

From the window Streeter and Logan watched the deputy sheriff drive off.

"He usually get a-goin' that fast, Mel?" inquired Streeter as the car picked up speed and disappeared down the road in a cloud of dust.

"Nope. He's usually what I'd call a slow and careful driver."

"Wal, then," reflected the old frontiersman, "I'd say he's in right smart of a hurry jes' now. And if he's hooked up with that gang, like I think he is, then that car is goin' to take a little spin down the beach before it pulls up in front of yore office. He shore got a eye-full of that there fancy shootin', eh?"

"Begins to look like your plan might work out, Dad. Or leastways, I begin to see through it. If it don't—well, I reckon the county will do what's right by Mollie," the sheriff's voice trailed off.

AN HOUR later Dad Streeter's aged touring car skidded to a stop on the sandy road some seven miles down the beach. Sheriff Logan, cautiously unlimbering his brittle legs, climbed slowly down from the seat.

"I shore would admire to take yore place, Mel." Streeter's voice was low and a bit choked.

"And I'm wishin' I had the same eyes I had ten year ago. But there ain't no use in us old fools wishing for impossible things."

The slim hands of the two men met; one brown and steady, the other pale and a little shaky.

"Luck, Mel."

"Thanks, Dad. And—*adios.*"

The peace officer turned on his heel and limped off into the marshland. Streeter, sitting motionless behind the wheel, watched his old friend disappear over the crest of a low sand dune.

"And if they get you, pardner, there's shore two pu'sons who'll hear Sam Streeter's six-shooter talk before many moons roll around," grimly promised the old borderman as he let in the clutch and headed his car back toward town.

THE afternoon sun was still high in the heavens when Sheriff Logan sat down heavily on the crumbling ribs of what had been a ship's longboat, which had been flung high up the beach by some wild gale. It had been a trying hour and he was tired of limb and sick at heart. He had done his duty, but that was empty consolation.

Tricked, hoaxed, the laughing stock of newspapers and political enemies. He could see it all now, through the calm, clouded eyes of age. He had accepted the challenge at face value, had gone, a lone old man, to the rendezvous designated by the Night Hawk. There he had found nothing but the desolate sand and the

swamp to mock him. Streeter's plan, which he had never understood clearly, had failed to pan out.

Suddenly he realized an automobile was coming up the beach road. He rose wearily to his feet and held up a hand. The driver slowed down and came to a halt.

"Goin' to town?" asked the sheriff of the man in the car, apparently a duck hunter bound back after a trip down the beach.

"Yep. Hop in, if you're going my way."

Logan climbed into the front seat beside the driver, and the machine rolled off. The hunter, a stranger to the officer, said his name was Jackson, referred to his poor shooting luck, and then lapsed into silence. The old man was content to abandon himself to his own morbid thoughts as the car skimmed over the hard-packed sand.

A couple miles from town a parked automobile loomed up in the roadbed ahead. A man was standing near the running board.

"Broke down, I guess," commented Jackson.

A minute later the hunter nudged his passenger in the ribs with an elbow.

"What the dickens?" he blurted out.

THE sheriff looked up in time to see the man dart from the side of the car into the mesquite thicket at the side of the road.

"Know who that was?" demanded the hunter. "Ed Styles, the deputy sheriff! What's he doing jumping into the brush like that?"

"Styles?" mumbled the sheriff.

All his failing eyes had told him was that the man was large and heavy.

"Yes, sir! Know him personally. He served a legal paper on me once. Let's stop and see what's up." The driver pulled on his emergency brake.

"Don't see what Ed could be doing here," puzzled the sheriff aloud as he stepped down and walked over to the stranded machine.

"By gad, it's my car!" he grunted, stepping around to examine the license number.

"Your car? Who are you?" asked the hunter, his eyes widening.

"I'm Sheriff Logan," explained the old man simply. "But I can't make out why my deputy is out in this neck of the woods and jumpin' into bushes like a scared jackrabbit."

Jackson climbed into the front seat of the sheriff's car and tried the starter. It whirred vigorously, but the engine failed to respond.

"Probably out of gas," surmised the hunter.

He raised the front cushion, unscrewed the cap and peeked into the tank.

"Bone dry!"

"That's funny. I filled her up this morning," observed the sheriff. "Mr. Jackson, it would be doing me a mighty big favor if you'd run on to town and have a garage send me out some gas. I'll just hang around here and wait, for things look kind of funny to me."

"I'll be glad to, Sheriff. I'll have it here in ten or fifteen minutes, I guess," said Jackson, jumping into his own car and getting under way.

The old sheriff climbed into the front seat of his stranded machine to rest his tired body. The duck hunter had been gone but a few moments when Logan heard footsteps coming up from behind.

He twisted his head around just as a deep, gruff voice boomed out, "Got three gallon, Ed. Enough to make our getaway!"

Thirty paces away a big, burly, dark-faced man was striding along swinging a galvanized gasoline can in one hand, the drooping rim of his black felt hat well down over his eyes. He looked up in time to see Sheriff Logan scramble down from the seat.

He froze in his tracks and stared wild-eyed at the old officer, who was now on the ground and fumbling for his gun. The gas can fell to the roadbed and, with the suddenness of a striking rattlesnake, the big man's right hand streaked for his hip. Logan tugged frantically to free his gun from the holster.

Sunlight glistened on nickle-plated steel as the stranger's six-shooter came into view. Sheriff Logan, beaten badly on the draw, instinctively turned sidewise to pre-

sent the smallest possible target to the other man's fire. As he did so, the newcomer's revolver whirled through the air, fell at the sheriff's feet and bounced harmlessly into a ditch at the side of the road.

"Fer God's sake, don't shoot, Sheriff!" The burly man stood cringing abjectly, both hands flung high above his head.

Seconds later Logan's six-gun jerked free and he covered the stranger.

"The Night Hawk, I reckon?" rasped the old man.

"You're right, Sheriff. I'm your man, but I danged near got away."

The criminal allowed the officer to snap handcuffs on his big wrists, and then climbed into the car at the other's bidding.

"My gun stuck. You had the drop on me. Why didn't you shoot?" demanded Logan, still puzzled.

"Shoot, hell! Think I'm goin' to swap lead with a old duck who can do the stunts with a gun you pulled this afternoon?"

"There's a lot more stuff needin' explainin', and I think I'll wait around until Styles comes back. Maybe he can throw a little light on the matter," said Logan.

"No need a-waitin' fer him, Sheriff. He ain't comin' back!"

"Ain't comin' back?"

"No sireeee! He's in this as thick as me. He's worse, fer he hired me to pull them jobs. I'm Jack, his brother."

WHEN the paper boy came around the next morning to the cabin on the beach front he found Dad Streeter waiting for him. The gnarled hands of the old man trembled as he unfolded the Morning *Post* and there was a shadow of anxiety in the alert old eyes as they peered through tin-rimmed spectacles.

LOGAN CAPTURES NIGHT HAWK SINGLE-HANDED

"Thank God, it worked!" fell from the lips of the old frontiersman.

Sitting cross-legged on the weather-beaten stoop of his home, the morning sun shining over his right shoulder, he read the story word by word. Finishing, he rolled a cigarette, lit it, and stared out over the blue waters of the gulf.

"Didn't figger that there hombre would take a chance with an old geezer who he thought could ventilate bull's-eyes at forty paces. About the best shootin' I ever did, and Styles a-thinkin' it was Mel doin' all that fancy work. Wal, I guess I'll hang up my shingle as a oculist fer failin' eyes, after this," chortled the old frontiersman as he gathered up his courage and rose to attack a huge pile of dirty dishes.

"IF YOU WON'T HELP ME, DON'T HELP THE BEAR"

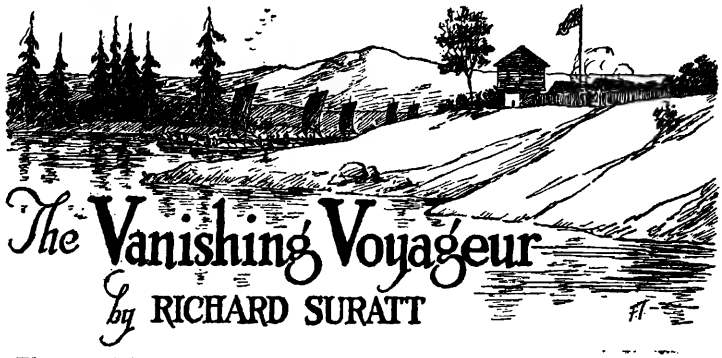
By MORVE L. WEAVER

JIM BRIDGER, the great scout and frontiersman, had a chum nearly or quite as daring and foolhardy as himself. On one occasion Bridger and his chum, Jim Baker, ran onto two young grizzly bears which they proposed to kill with knives and have something really worth while to brag about.

They laid aside their other arms and, each choosing a bear, waded in, but found the bears elusive and possessed of considerable boxing ability. The sparring continued so long that the men grew apprehensive that Mamma Bear might appear and take a hand.

Baker finally succeeded in closing in on his bear and made a lucky stroke with his knife. Drawing back, he saw that Bridger was in difficulty and no little danger, his bear having virtually disrobed him and made a fair start toward skinning him. At Bridger's earnest solicitation for help Baker waded into the second fight, and Bridger calmly withdrew and left it to Baker to finish, which he finally did.

When asked by Baker why he would not come to the rescue after Baker had taken the fight off his hands, Bridger replied, "Well, it was your proposition and I like to see a man play out his hand."



The Vanishing Voyageur

by RICHARD SURATT

The stage-driver and freighter of the old West are gone, but deep in the wild interior of British Columbia the picturesque voyageurs—the descendants of the gay voyageurs of early Hudson's Bay Company days—still ply their carefree and hardy trade

THE *voyageurs* had come up from the foot of the lake the night before in their big thirty-foot trading *bateau,* which now lay with its shovel nose drawn up on the beach, waiting for the cargo of flour, rice, tea, tobacco, ammunition and what not—all bound one hundred and fifty miles down the Dease River to Liard Post.

A short distance up the beach lay another craft in the process of construction. Its bow was also shovel-nose, but its stern was tunneled underneath to house the bronze blades of a propeller.

Antone, the captain of the *voyageurs,* squatted beside a pile of lumber and blew smoke rings in the air as he contemplated the strange craft now taking shape before his very eyes.

"What kind of *batcau*—this one?" he finally made bold to inquire of the builders.

"Gas boat, Antone. *Mika Kumtux?* Engine-boat! Go fast! Go Liard Post one day! Come back three days! Carry five ton—two men."

Antone was allowed ample time to ponder over this phenomenon; then the boat-builder loosed another shaft at the old half-breed.

"Pretty soon no more *voyageurs,* eh, Tony? This fellow gas-engine-man soon put you out of business."

Antone grunted. Yes, it was all very true! He had been expecting something like this for a long time. He had worked for the white men since he was a boy and he knew them for a restless breed; never content to let things go as they are—always change.

The old man grew reminiscent. He called to mind the first steamboat he had seen. That was years ago, over across the divide on the Stikine. Before the steamboat there had been the big cedar war-canoes manned by strapping Thlingets from the coast. They paddled and lined and poled and sailed one hundred and sixty-five miles up the river from Fort Wrangell, the little seaport in southeastern Alaska.

It was in the eighties that the first sternwheeler came. There had been vague prophecy of its coming, but the old people had been sceptical. Old Et-mah-tah, the shaman, took no chances, however. He made incantation and promised swift destruction, not only for the steamboat, but also for all who were instrumental in bringing the infernal thing up the river.

Well, it came! A great monster which vomited black smoke from its topside. Et-mah-tah had commanded that all the people be there at the landing to witness the effect of his "medicine." Consternation

reigned. Some of the women were on the verge of hysteria. Nearly everyone was for taking to the hills while there was yet time. But Et-mah-tah bade them take heart; when the time came he would act.

He waited until the steamboat was quite close, then he strode forth to the river bank, made a dramatic gesture as if to say, "Behold, now, my power!" inhaled a deep breath and— *Pouf!* He blew with all his might and all the power of his lungs at the white man's boat.

The tribesmen waited open-mouthed for the terrible denouement. Would the monster disappear beneath the water or would it merely dissolve in a cloud of vapor like a pinch of gunpowder when a match is applied?

Strange to relate, it did neither. Suddenly a white plume of smoke floated up from the funnel and the hoarse bellow of the steamer's whistle smote their ears.

This unearthly racket was too much for the trembling tribesmen, whose nerves had been on edge for weeks. Those who were fleet of foot started for the hills—Et-mah-tah well in the lead—leaving the old people to face destruction with what fortitude they might.

So, that's the way things go! First it had been the steamboat. Then came the caterpillar, snorting over the Dease portage, frightening the packhorses with its noise and evil smell. Now comes the gasboat to the Dease. *Diable!*

Pretty soon no more *voyageurs.*

IN ORDER to comprehend fully the effect of such a radical change, one must understand something of the life of the *voyageur* and the industry which gave him being.

The chronicles of the Northwest have mentioned them briefly, laying emphasis on the casualties which resulted when the brigades of two rival fur companies ran foul of each other.

Fiction writers have dealt with them to some length but their works, in the main, are replete with conflict, bloodshed and the manhandling of "free-traders." Much of which presents a very distorted view of an honorable calling which has served the needs of frontier commerce for some two hundred and fifty years.

The sagas of the fur trade were recorded by the pens of clerks in the service of two great trading companies—the Nor'westers and the Hudson's Bay. The Hudson's Bay Company controlled the fur traffic in eastern Canada and the prairie provinces, while the Northwest Company sought to monopolize the West.

The officers and men of both companies were daring and aggressive and it was only a matter of time until the two rivals would be at each other's throats in a battle for supremacy.

This battle was never fought, except for some bushwhacking and skirmishing, for early in the nineteenth century the directors of the companies effected a merger and the employees of the Northwest Company directed their energies to the task of building up a bigger and better Hudson's Bay Company.

The history of the New World offers few finer examples of gallant courage than the annals of the fur trade, nor can a more picturesque figure be found in all the pages of romance than that of the Canadian *voyageur.*

Primitive, impulsive, undisciplined, recognizing no law other than the edicts of the fur-kings, men have marveled at their loyalty and devotion to a corporation founded and perpetuated solely in the interests of its stockholders.

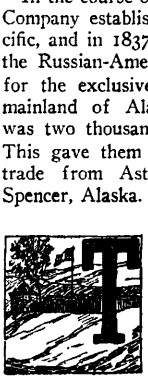
A formidable organization was the Great Company; with prestige gained through a century and a half of hard-won conquest. Possibly it was this suggestion of primitive force which called to the primitive in the Indian and half-breed, binding them to her with ties more secure than the oath which binds men to king or country.

Whether it was admiration for courage, for splendid arrogance—arrogance such as that of a factor who walked into a hostile Indian camp, seized the headman by the chin and said, "This man has the look of a villain"—for the pomp and ceremony which the traditions of the Company prescribed, or merely a fondness for ad-

venture and excitement, that brought these restless spirits to her standard, no one can say. The fact remains that these sashed and beaded *voyageurs,* led by an intrepid Mackenzie, Frazer or Ogden, pushed north to the Arctic ice, west to the Pacific and south to California, fighting tooth and nail with the Russians, the Americans and the Spaniards for the fur trade of an empire.

But it was the Yankees who caused the greatest turmoil and confusion. "Boston Men" they were called and they aroused the ire of the English, or "King George's Men," by underselling the latter in trade and paying higher prices for fur. Down out of the Pacific swooped these Yankee free-traders, buying the skins of beaver and sea-otter which they disposed of in Canton, exchanging the furs for tea which they took home to Boston.

In the course of time the Hudson's Bay Company established posts along the Pacific, and in 1837 they closed a deal with the Russian-American Company of Sitka for the exclusive right to trade on the mainland of Alaska. The consideration was two thousand sea-otters per annum. This gave them a monopoly of the fur trade from Astoria, Oregon, to Cape Spencer, Alaska.



HEN began the Reign of Fur. Fort St. James in central British Columbia became the stronghold of the fur kings west of the Rocky Mountains. This district was known as New Caledonia, and the chief factor of the district had the powers of a despot.

And yet, for all their autocratic powers, it is only fair to say that the weight of jurisprudence rested on them heavily. In matters of trade they may have erred in their fidelity to the Service, but always the broad sense of Anglo-Saxon justice held them in bounds and the story of their reign forms one of the most illustrious chapters in the history of the Northwest.

The high officials of the Company traveled through the wilderness in a state bordering on medieval grandeur. Fleets of York boats, canoes or bateaux made up their convoy. Their craft were fitted up with all the luxuries of that period and are said to have compared favorably with the private cars of some modern industrial magnates.

The suite usually included a private chef and numerous body servants and porters who attended to the baggage and camp equipment. If the traveling dignitary hailed from the highlands of Scotland a bagpiper was also included in his retinue.

When the brigade drew near to a post the visiting official donned his best raiment, put on his high beaver hat and stood in the bow of the boat while the piper took his station in the stern and gave a few preliminary toots to test his virtuosity. The post, upon hearing the bagpipe, acknowledged the honor which was about to be paid them by hoisting the Company's flag and discharging a volley of musketry.

This was the day of the *voyageur.* Picturesque brigades sallied forth from this wilderness keep, gathering the toll of furs from all the far-flung posts of the Rockies. Gay and daring were these argonauts of trade—proud blood of old France and England mingled with the fierce blood of the Indian—bringing with them the courteous charm and the restless passions which had been their heritage.

In the summer the *voyageur* dipped his paddle or plied his oar in the water brigades which served the outlying posts or transported fur bales to the sea. In the fall he caught and smoked salmon or whitefish to feed the dogs that he would drive in the winter. His pay was one hundred dollars per year with rations and ammunition thrown in.

ND the present day *voyageur*—what of him? Does he still tread the water-trails of his forebears and sing his plaintive *chansons* to the silences? Yes, but one must venture far afield to find such picturesque characters these days, for the tide of change has swept romance before it and it is only in the remote districts like the

Liard and the Dease that the *voyageur* is still in vogue.

With the possible exception of the captain, the river crews of the Northwest are invariably young men—half-breeds and full-blooded Indians. Seldom, indeed, is a white man found who is willing to accept the meager wage for this heartbreaking toil along the turbulent waterways of the Rockies.

The *voyageurs* of today are chosen among the young men who grow up on the streams where the bateaux are still in service. After one season on the river they are seldom ever content to lead the humdrum existence around the posts.

There is Tommie, for example. Tommie is a half-breed youth of seventeen—the offspring of some roving trapper or prospector. Tommie is irresponsible and full of mischief, he runs with a band of skalawags about the same age who are known colloquially as "cowboys." Girls of the same age and disposition are called "cowgirls."

For many months Tommie has yearned for a fiddle all his own. He cannot go to the trader and demand credit because he has no trapline, as yet, and therefore no prospects of paying. The trader, however, is diplomatic—as all traders must be.

"Tommie, why don't you work on the bateau with the other boys?" he suggests. "They are going to Liard in a few days; if you go with them you will have a good time. There will be many Indians there, and much dancing and 'stick' gambling; also plenty of 'cowgirls.'"

"How much you pay?" enquires the hopeful Thomas.

"Four dollar a day—and plenty grub!"

Tommie's eyes linger fondly on the fiddle hanging from the ceiling of the store. It is not a good fiddle, but to Tommie it possesses all the virtue of Stradivarius himself.

"S'pose I work you gimme dat fiddle?"

"Sure thing!" agrees the trader. "I'll let you have it at 'cost landed,' too." He places Tommie's name in a ledger labeled, "Indian Accounts" and the boy suddenly realizes that he has come into a man's estate.

The day of departure arrives. Tommie carries his rifle and blankets to the landing, stows his bundle under the forward deck and takes his place at one of the heavy sweeps. There are five other oarsmen, besides the bowman and the captain. At a signal from the trader they cast off the line and the big scow drops slowly down-stream.

Soon the current snatches the boat and hurries them on with greater speed. The first ten miles of the Dease are tortuous, the current swift, and there are many sharp bends which compel the men at the sweeps to work furiously to provide steerageway. Gradually the river widens; now the men pull in their sweeps and drift with the current.

Presently it is lunch time. There are no regular hours for meals; when a man feels hungry he suggests to the captain that it wouldn't be a bad idea to stop and make tea. The captain swings in close to shore and the bowman makes a flying leap into the brush and snubs the line around a tree.

At night the camp is more elaborate. Each man cuts balsam boughs for his bed and if the mosquitoes are out in force he pitches a tiny mosquito net to sleep under. If rain threatens, poles are cut and leaned together in the form of a teepee with a tarpaulin for cover. T[illegible]'s serves as a kitchen for the cook.

Before they leave the place a tree is blazed smooth with an ax and inscribed with the date, the names of the *voyageurs,* all in proper rank, the "outfit" for whom they work and their destination. Other information may be added. This record is for others who may be traveling along the same route, for no right-minded Indian will ever pass a fresh camp spot without some investigation to ascertain the who, why, when and wherefore of the traveler. Any departure from this ancient custom would be considered a breach of sylvan etiquette.

NOW they round a sharp bend in the river and see another crew of *voyageurs,* tracking their bateau up-stream Tommie's captain unfurls the "houseflag" of his company and fires a salute from his Winchester. The

captain of the other bateau acknowledges this courtesy by hoisting his flag and emptying his rifle in the air. Then the two boats tie up to the bank, tea is made, pipes are lighted and the men chat fraternally.

Here the lines of caste are sharply drawn. The two captains draw aloof and speak on weighty matters. They inform each other about conditions along the parts of the river which they have just traversed. Meanwhile the *voyageurs* are exchanging choice bits of woodland scandal. Perhaps there is a man in each crew who is renowned for his skill as a wrestler. Taunts fly back and forth across the fire and in no time at all the two champions are breast to breast. Each man tries to snatch his opponent by the seat of the pants and lift him off the ground. When either of the contestants is thrown to the ground he is considered vanquished.

Off again! Now the speed of the current increases. An ominous rumble away in the distance warns them of the canyon. Whitewater ahead! The oarsmen draw in their sweeps and strip down to the waist. Got to work like hell, now! The noise of the rapids increases from a faint rumble to a decided roar. Dandy Jim, the bowman, stands erect to glimpse the chaos of surging waters. He signals with upraised hand to the captain whenever a tower of white spray reveals a hidden boulder in the channel. Clouds of spray fall like a summer shower and the few scattering trees growing in crevices near the water flash past in a green blur.

Out go the sweeps again; stand up and row!

"Give 'er hell, boys!" thunders the captain.

A cheer goes up as they shoot through the last whirlpool and catch the slack water of an eddy. Now the boat is beached on a sandbar while they bail the water out and search through duffle bags for "high-tone" clothes. Wet moccasins are thrown away and new ones, highly ornamented, are slipped on. Bright-colored handkerchiefs are knotted around their throats and the Stetsons are decorated with feathers and ribbons. "Cowgirls" will be at the landing!

Once more they strain at the sweeps; then out into the mighty Liard. The whitewashed logs of Liard Post loom up and the *voyageurs* discharge their rifles in the air and listen. There it is—the answering shots from the post! The captain raises his flag and away in the distance an answering bit of scarlet bunting flutters in the breeze and rises slowly to the peak of the tall flagpole.

Crowds at the landing! Nomad bands from all the northern Rockies. Pellies from the Yukon, Dogribs and Yellowknives from the Mackenzie, Nelsons and Carriers from the south. Who are those wild fellows there? Nahanis! Look out for them—they're hard-boiled!

Unload the mail first, then the cargo—five tons. Everybody work hard for a couple of hours, then you can have your fun. Old Chief Natuga is giving a *potlach* in memory of some deceased relative. There will be a dance in front of his teepee.

Down at the other end of the big meadow the Nahanis are "stick" gambling. There is a long fire with men kneeling on each side, bobbing up and down as they play. You put your hands behind you, or under a blanket, hide one of the fur-trade "tokens" in one hand and shake them both in front of the man across the fire from you. You laugh at him like a loon and shout insults at him so he'll guess wrong. Always you keep time with the drums—bobbing up and down on your knees and chanting "huh huh huuuuuh, huh huh huuuuuh" swaying and jerking your body and your arms. If he guesses right you pay him some plugs of tobacco, or your rifle or dog—or your wife. Don't be a piker!

DAWN breaks with mist hanging low over the river. Dogs are prowling among the smouldering teepee fires, looking for stray scraps of food. The *voyageurs* roll up in their blankets under the eaves of the fur-warehouse and try to get some sleep. Tomorrow they load the fur-bales and leave at sunset, so they can track in the cool of the evening.

By noon the men are astir. The heavy fur-bales are loaded, their commissary replenished and they are ready to start back to Dease Lake. It will be up-stream work now; six men on the long tracking line, the bowman and the captain steering.

Sometimes a man is sent ahead with an ax to cut away the overhanging brush and trees. Sometimes they are in water up to their armpits. Where there is no footing for tracking they climb aboard the bateau and push with poles. Three days to come down and three weeks to go back!

BUT soon there will be no freighting on the Dease with *voyageurs*. The use of power boats will make for a cheaper "cost landed," and reduce the hazards of fur shipments.

Masters, the outer places will miss these brown-skinned vagabonds of yours. They will miss the tread of their moccasins along the water-trails and the incense of their camp-fires among the spruce groves and the clear song of "slavatia" in the velvet twilight.

And what of Jeannie-Marie? She will be waiting at the landing for her Dandy Jim. Who is there with the tact and gift of speech to explain to her that Dandy Jim is not coming—that he will come no more—that he has passed on into the realm of romance, along with the freighter and stage-driver of the Old West?

BANDIT TREASURE

By EDWIN L. SABIN

IN THE summer of 1864 the "Captain" Jim Reynolds band of freebooters, having by mistaken idea raided from Confederate Texas into Colorado, held up the stagecoach bound from the Buckskin Jo placers in the Fairplay mining region of South Park, central Colorado, to Denver. This occurred at the old McLaughlin Ranch station, ten miles out of Fairplay. They secured $10,000 in gold dust, amalgam and currency; disabled the coach, and at their leisure defiantly beat back along the stage road, over Kenosha Hill Pass, in the direction of Denver.

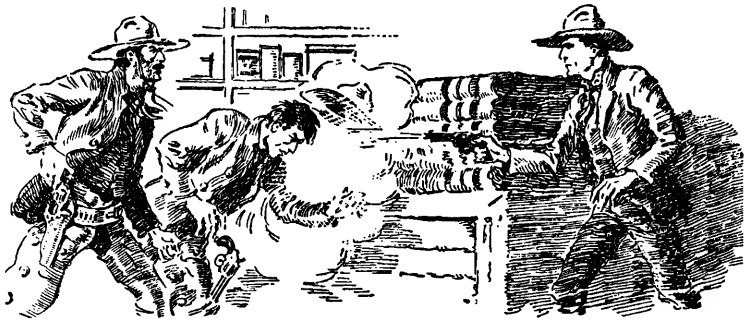
In Geneva Gulch of the beautiful Geneva Creek of the North Fork of the South Platte River, about seventy miles from Denver, they were surprised in camp by a posse, while dividing part of the loot. Owen Singletary was shot dead, but the rest of the band escaped. Just prior to this Captain Reynolds and his brother John had buried $40,000 in currency wrapped in oiled silk, and three cans of gold dust comprising $23,000—proceeds of several hold-ups.

Death by violence dogged the band until in the fall of 1871 only John Reynolds was left. Fatally shot while stealing horses in New Mexico, he turned over the secret of the treasure cache to his partner, Albert Brown: an old prospect hole near timberline above the head of Deer Creek, the mouth filled in with rocks; the blade of a butcher knife stuck into a tree, four feet above ground and pointing to the hole. With wet gunpowder he drew a map upon the back of a letter.

Brown lit out for Denver; there enlisted a veteran prospector, J. N. Cochran, who knew the treasure region perfectly and who pronounced the map accurate. They searched, from the head of Geneva Gulch up the divide to the heads of Deer Creek—all north of the present railway station of Grant on that North Fork of the South Platte, which is a summer-resort section.

Fire had destroyed the old timber; snows and rains had done their work—the country is wild and rough. Brown never found the cache. No one has yet found it.

The map was long in evidence; copies of it are still extant and many a man, like the writer, has hunted in vain for that $63,000 prospect hole. A small picket fence surrounded the Singletary grave at the site of the surprised camp in the gulch; and as other mute testimony to the ways of the evil-doer the head of Owen Singletary was for many years exhibited, in alcohol, in the historic little town of Fairplay



BROKEN GLASS TALKS

By J. E. GRINSTEAD

Author of "How Many Is a Squad?" "The Stuff Rangers Are Made Of," etc.

The outlaws had gone before Clint Terry reached Palo Verde, leaving a trail of destruction in the raided town—but in that trail lay a little fragment that spoke volumes to the Texas Ranger

IT WAS a gray, bleak November day. A little bundle of weather in a place where it had no business to be. According to the strange jargon of the Weather Bureau, there had been a "low" somewhere about the mouth of the Rio Grande, and a "high" up in Montana. The low started northwest and the high started southwest. Naturally, they would meet, and when they met there was likely to be rough weather. Of course, with all the time and words in the world, the Weather Bureau would use more space than this in telling it. Again, with no knowledge of any language except plain Texas and border Mex, Mr. Chuck Thompson expressed it in still fewer words.

"At daylight this mawnin' it were trying to rain; now it's colder than a dead puppy's nose, and getting colder fast," he summarized.

Mr. Thompson had all the time in the world, too, but just now he was busy. He was cleaning up a mess in the Favorite Saloon, and preparing to take his losses as gamely as he could manage.

A lone rider came clopping into Palo Verde's lone street, entering it from the west end. The hoofs of his horse sounded strangely on the damply packed sand. This rider had been in the old border town often, but he had never seen the sand damp before. It had always been parched, and begging for a drink. This lone rider also made a comment on the weather that was terse and to the point.

"It's goin' to be colder'n hell!" he said, looking over his shoulder at a dark bank that was rising in the northwest.

He rode on into town, apparently unmindful that he had just referred to a place that is supposed to be rather torrid than frigid. The fact of the matter was that he was thinking now of something other than the weather. Palo Verde had been an old, dilapidated town from the first. Before it had cut its stomach-teeth it was hoary and wrinkled with age, but it had never before looked as it looked now. On this blustery morning, when window-panes were needed, a whole pane of glass in a window was rather the exception than the rule. Doors were broken, signs hung awry, and the only people in sight were a few Mexicans who peered out smashed

windows, with the wildest of wild fright in their eyes.

Clint Terry, Ranger scout, read the signs shrewdly. This old border town, scene of many battles, had been looted. It was no novel experience. Palo Verde had been looted before, and often. The point was that the looters seemed to have done a very thorough and workmanlike job, this time.

Terry blew his breath on his fingers, to warm them. No sane man would think of riding into Palo Verde with gloves on his hands, and his gun packed away for winter. There was a twisted grin on the Ranger's hard lips, as he noticed one of the double front doors of the Silver Bell saloon and dancehall. It was hanging drunkenly by one hinge, and in lieu of crêpe on the door there was a filmy silken garment tied to the latch. This had been contributed, doubtless unwillingly, by some dancehall girl, who was now probably hiding in a remote *jacal.*

Chuck Thompson was displaying his gold butter-tooth, not in a grin, but in a snarl of rage. He had swept up a little mound of broken glass, opposite the back end of the bar, and was contemplating it. That mound was composed of bar bottles, whisky glasses, and anything else breakable that had been in the Favorite when the storm broke.

"Damn Clint Terry to the southwest section of hell, anyway!" snarled Chuck, as he stared at the mountain of broken glass. Then he almost jumped out of his hide, as the glass apparently replied:

"All right. Go ahead and damn him to it. That'll be warmer than it is here."

CHUCK whirled about, to see the grinning Ranger almost at his elbow, and also staring at that pile of broken glass. Terry went on:

"Gimme a shot of the best whisky you got, Chuck, before I freeze to death. Then you can cuss me some more when I get warm."

Chuck turned and passed behind the bar. As he did so, Terry stooped quickly, picked up something from the little mountain of broken glass, and dropped it into his pocket. Then facing the bar, he gravely poured a stiff drink and swallowed it.

"Where was you when the cyclone struck?" grinned Clint, as a chaser.

"Right in the middle of it!"

"Wasn't perforated, was you?"

"No! I was under the bar when the shooting started, and I stayed there until it was over."

"I see. Well, go ahead and tell me about it. Why were you cussin' me to all them hot sections?"

"Aw, hell, Clint! I told you all the time that some day the gangs in around Palo Verde would find out that Rangers were getting information here, and they'd take the place apart."

"Who was it?"

"I—I didn't know any of 'em for certain."

"Oh, you knew 'em, but you didn't know 'em for certain! How come?" and Clint's gray eyes bored into Chuck like hot augurs.

"What I mean, I—I couldn't plumb swear to none of 'em. I seen 'em, but bein' under the bar thataway, and all."

"Was you under the bar when they come in?"

"No, but it's like this. Everyone of 'em had a bandana over his face, with just eyeholes."

"Oh, they did. How many were in the gang?"

"They was ten comes in here. I know, 'cause they all taken straight whisky at two bits a drink. One fellow throwed down a fi'-dollar goldpiece, and I give him back two silver dollars and a Mex half that some crook had passed on me."

"Good business! Now, tell me why you cussed me, particularly. I'm not the only Ranger in Texas."

"Aw hell, Clint! You're too modest. Everybody knows that if it weren't for yo' scouting the Rangers never would find out anything. 'Sides that, most everything that's been pulled around Palo Verde, you've pulled it by yo' lonesome."

"Well, is that anything to be cursed for?"

"A feller don't like to see his business shot all to hell," said Chuck, doggedly.

"You been makin' it so hard for the boys that they just gets together and takes it out on pore old Palo Verde, 'cause you allers stops here."

"That's it, eh? The law's all right until it interferes with business. Your business has suffered some, too, and——"

"Now, see here, Clint! Don't say that. All this Ranger stuff has just about ruint business in Palo Verde, but I been coming clean with you, and I still aim to."

"Yes. I believe you have, when it came to a pinch. You say you don't know for certain who those fellows were. Tell me who you think they were."

"Clint, this is the damnedest porest country to think in that can be found in America. A fellow that tries to think here is apt to wish he hadn't—if he don't get his wisher plumb broke and ruined before he can use it."

"I see. You think it ain't safe to think. All right. You're worth more to me alive than you would be dead. The point is, fellows like you that depend on these rough boys for business are hurt worse than the gangs themselves. They spend money and you fellows get the profit. If anybody wants the Rangers to stay out of here for business reasons, it would be——"

"Hell, Clint! Ain't I always come clean with you? Would us fellows that's got a little business here in Palo Verde shoot our own town up? I tell you, it's the gangs, trying to make Palo Verde afraid of lightning. They've just put us on notice this time. Next time they'll take the old town apart for good."

"What makes you think that?"

"They told me so! While they was taking that first drink, the boss of the outfit laid down the whole law and the prophets to Palo Verde, and——"

CHUCK was interrupted by a rather good looking, middle aged Mexican woman, who came in at the broken front door, gesticulating wildly. Her lips were blue with the cold, and her teeth were chattering. She jabbered frantically, in Spanish, for a minute. Chuck asked her a few questions. She replied to them wildly, and finally went out, crossing herself and pattering prayers.

"Now, what do you think of that?" asked Chuck. "Think the Palo Verde folks would pull a thing like that for business reasons? Just to get a little trade?"

"No!" snapped Terry, his gray eyes glinting with rage. "Do you know the woman?"

"Shore I know her! That's Maria Ray. You ought to know her. She grew up at Del Rio. Was old Jesus Rubiola's daughter. Good straight Mexican folks. Maria was about the prettiest girl in town. Then along comes that hell-roarin' Buck Ray, from somewhere back in the state. He steals Maria out and marries her, all regular. Then he goes hellin' around and leads Maria a dog's life. Finally, he gets into a gun mess, right here in Palo Verde, about two year ago, and gets killed. That leaves Maria——"

"That's the woman that was just in here that you're talking about," interrupted Clint.

"Shore it is."

"But what about the woman those fellows stole and took off with 'em?"

"I'm coming to her. That's Lina Ray, Buck Ray's and Maria's daughter. After Buck gets kilt, Maria and the girl live in a little whitewashed 'dobe shack, away out at the west end of the street. And last night them fellows——"

"How old is the girl?"

"Oh—let's—see. I don't know. Sixteen—maybe eighteen. Anyway, she's a growed woman, and the prettiest thing I ever laid eyes on in my life. Straight as a string, too. Never went about the dance-halls and *bailes* and the like. It's a plumb damn' shame!"

"Shame, hell! It's a killin' case, and I don't give a damn who done it. It don't make no difference whether she's all white, or what she is, she's a Texas woman. Plain killin' and robbin' is one thing. Raising hell for business reasons is another thing. But packin' off decent women, or any other kind for that matter, is something else altogether."

"Yes, that's so, too, but nothing can be did."

"Maybe not, but— When was this raid?"

"Last night just after dark."

Clint clamped his jaws shut to keep from futile cursing. The peak of the norther had struck. It was drawing on toward noon, and was as cold as Clint had said it would be. He put his horse in Chuck's stable, back of the Favorite, and fed it liberally. Then he went to a little chili joint that was open for business, having escaped the general devastation, and got some dinner. Just as he was paying his bill, Maria Ray came into the place. The restaurant was run by Antonio Torres, a Mexican of the better class, his wife, and a daughter about grown. The girl was standing behind the narrow counter, wide-eyed with fear, as Maria fell into the arms of the *posadera,* and began sobbing the story of her lost daughter. As Clint went out, he caught the words, "Ah, *hija mia! Chiquita cordera mia!*" and saw the tears streaming down the faces of the two women, as poor Maria Ray went on wailing, over and over, "Ah, my daughter! My little lamb!"

BACK at the Favorite, well fed and with a good fire going in the big stove, Clint Terry should have been comfortable, but he wasn't. The norther was screaming around the corners of the house, and in every shriek of it Clint could hear the wail of the mother for her lost daughter. Chuck left Clint to keep house, while he went to lunch. When he was gone, Clint rolled a smoke, then ran his hand into his pocket for the little silver matchcase that he always carried. With it, he brought out the object that he had picked up from the pile of broken glass and had almost forgotten. After lighting his cigarette, he returned the case to his pocket, and sat looking at the thing in his hand.

At a glance, it looked like a bit of glass that had been broken off a green bottle, but it wasn't. It was a tiny, slender thing. As thick, perhaps, as a thin slate pencil, and less than an inch long. Clint turned it about in his hand, and looked at it closely for a full minute. Then taking out his pocketbook, he opened it and laid the little object in a compartment as carefully as if it had been a sacred relic. Then returning the book to his pocket, he rolled and smoked three cigarettes in rapid succession, lighting each one from the butt of the other one before it.

As he threw down the last butt, he muttered, through the curtain of smoke about him, "Foo Chee! Half Mex, half Chinese, and—all devil. I wonder if that slant-eyed hellion has been on this side of the Rio Grande. If not, he has an agent here."

Clint had heard of Foo Chee, the bandit chief, stealing women on the Mexican side of the river, but this was the first time he had heard of his trying to steal an American woman, and it set him wild with rage.

Five minutes later, when Chuck Thompson came in, rubbing his hands and shivering, he rushed to the big stove. There was still a curtain of smoke about the stove, and little wisps of it were floating up the hot pipe toward the ceiling, but Clint Terry wasn't there. Chuck warmed his hands and waited a few minutes, supposing the Ranger had merely stepped out for a minute, and the bitter cold would soon drive him back. At last, he went out to the stable. Clint's horse was gone! Chuck went back and stepped behind the bar to get his pipe. On the bar lay a piece of paper with a silver dollar on it. On the paper was scrawled:

One pint. Keep the change.

"Now, I know I'll be damned!" growled Chuck. "I wonder if that unchained tiger picked up a lead in here. I'll tell the tender, blue-eyed world that I didn't tell him a thing. He must have seen the wheels turning in my head. And going out into a blizzard like this! I'd hate to be the gent he's after, and—I'd hate to be Clint, if and when he finds that gent. Clint's a mighty good friend, when he is a friend, but sometimes it's mighty nigh hell to have a friend like that. If it's found out that he's been here today, I might as well begin to pack up and get ready to go some place besides Palo Verde. This is one more hell of a life!" he sighed in conclusion, and lighting his pipe, sat down by the big

stove, to go on wondering what had become of Clint Terry.

AND, what had become of the Ranger scout? Battling the blizzard, which at times seemed as if it would blow the very mane from his horse's neck, Clint was beating steadily southwest, but making decidedly slow progress. Nightfall found him well down a great gorge that led from the uplands down to the sandy valley of the Rio Grande. He was more than twenty miles from Palo Verde, and his horse was getting tired. At last, he turned into a narrow lateral gorge, unsaddled his horse, and gave it the little grain he carried for an emergency ration. Then he made a tiny fire and thawed his numb hands. Tracks he had found, plenty of them, but only one sign that he was on the trail of a woman. Just where he entered the big gorge, he had found where several horses had stood close together. Seeing something red on the ground, he had dismounted and picked it up. It was a coral bead. He kicked about in the sand and picked up three more. That was enough. There had been a scuffle and a string of beads had been broken. There were several burnt matches on the ground, which told their own story. It had happened before daylight that morning. The bandits had struck matches and tried to find the beads, in order to hide their trail. These four had been overlooked.

The night was bitter cold. There'd be little chance for sleep. Clint hoped the norther would continue. It would cause the looters to hole up somewhere, thinking no one would follow them in weather like that. He opened his pocketbook and took out his sacred relic. He took the four beads from his pocket and laid them beside it in his hand. Then he studied the mass for a long time, like some devotee worshipping a strange god. At last, he put them all in his pocketbook and returned it to his pocket. After that, he dozed and woke, replenished the little fire, dozed again, and woke again. When the first hint of daylight found its way into the gorge, he saddled and mounted. As he rode on down the gorge, he looked up at the trees on the brink. The wind had changed in the night, and was now blowing from the south quite as hard as it had blown from the north. That was good. Everybody knew the south end of a norther bit to the bone. No one would face that wind unless he had to do it. No great headway could be made against it, if one tried. If the looters were heading for the river, as he suspected, they'd have to travel right into the teeth of that wind.

The walls of the canyon fell away, at last, and the trail came out in the open, wind-swept valley. Clint knew the place very well. It was ten miles from the river and the country in between was open and pretty evenly divided between chaparral and naked sandy ground. A cloud of sand was being swept up from the river. Just outside the mouth of the gorge and half a mile from the trail, on the west side of it, were some pens, a windmill, and a long, low 'dobe building. This was Ransleben's Store, as well known a trading point as there was on the border.

When old Sam Ransleben built it, the place was a godsend to that part of the country, for Sam was a square-shooter and a good man. Sam was killed in a gunfight and nobody ever knew the facts about it. The store and ranch, such as it was, had changed hands several times since Ransleben's death, though it was still called Ransleben's Store. Clint didn't know who ran it, now, but he felt pretty sure his job would at least begin there if it didn't end there.

He rode up to the place, and dropping his reins on the ground, tried the door. It was locked. He could see horses in the corral, and it was time of day for a store to be open. Besides that, he was cold and hungry, and he wanted something to eat. He rapped on the door, and presently it opened.

"Hell!" said a dark, heavily built man, as he opened the door. "Have you knocked before?"

"Once," said Clint, as he pushed by the man and entered the store. "It's cold out there, and I'd like to get something to eat."

"Sure," said the merchant, closing and barring the door. "Wind's so strong the

latch won't hold. All I can give you is some canned stuff."

"That'll do, but can't you rustle me some coffee?"

"Why—I—don't know. I'm sorty playing a lone hand here, and—nobody to cook. Just sorty batching it."

THERE were two thoughts in Clint's mind, and the uppermost one was that the fellow was lying. In the first place, there were at least half a dozen horses in the corral. Another thing, when he first came in, he had heard voices, somewhere in the back of the building. The store room wasn't more than twenty feet long, and there was a closed door to one side at the back. He had estimated the building as at least sixty feet long. He was wondering what was back there. The man went behind the counter, to get down whatever Clint might order. Meantime, Clint's eyes had become accustomed to the dark room, which had only two small, dirty windows at the front.

The man turned facing the Ranger, and instantly Clint knew here was one of the men that had raided Palo Verde, and probably the leader. After that, he didn't hesitate a moment. He ordered a can of peaches. The man set it on the narrow counter to open it, and while he was looking down at the can opener Clint's gun landed on the side of his head and he slipped to the floor.

With the spring of a panther and noiseless as a cat, Clint was around the counter. Picking the man up, bodily, he carried him to the other side of the store, bound, and gagged him, and, rolling him under the counter, covered him with some blankets. For one time in his life, man-hunting wasn't just the day's work with Clint Terry. His anger was thoroughly aroused. This wasn't just a little bit of border rough stuff. It was an international affair, as far as he was concerned.

Under the guise of retaliating for some of the work he had done on the border, this gang was undertaking something that couldn't happen in America. They had shot up and wrecked the old cowtown, telling the world they were doing it to intimidate the people and prevent them from giving information to the Rangers. Meantime, and indeed he believed that was the chief purpose of their visit to Palo Verde, they had stolen a woman. A beautiful girl, born in Texas, and a citizen of the United States. Ordinary bandits didn't steal women. They couldn't get by with it. There was none on the American side who could hope to put it over. Only the princes of the craft, such as Foo Chee, the Chinese-Mexican breed and terror of the Mexican side of the border, would attempt it.

Clint was now sure that the girl had been stolen for Foo Chee's seraglio, hidden away in the mountains of Mexico. If she had been carried across the river, there was no hope for her. If she was still on the Texas side, he meant to keep her there, or know why.

These things were running through Clint's mind, as he hid the man, and straightened up, with something in his hand which he dropped into a pocket of his coat. If his guess was right and he had evidence to back it up, he was in about as close a place as he had ever been in his life. Chuck had said there were ten in the gang. They were probably not all in the store at the time, but there must be some of them there, and there was always danger that others might come in. Well, whether he was right or not, he was sure that the man under the counter was in the mob that stole the girl, and in his mind that was a killing offense, no matter what he meant to do with her. Any others there would belong to the same gang, so far as he was concerned. It was going to be rough, and he meant to take the initiative.

The door to the back room was at the end of the counter behind which the man had stood when Clint knocked him out. It had a heavy iron hook for a latch, and Clint noticed it was in place. There was no crack or keyhole in the door, through which one could peep from the back room. Going to the front door, he unbarred it, and saw that the man had lied about the wind blowing it open. The latch held perfectly. He guessed he'd just let things sweat a while, and eat something while he

waited. So, opening the peaches, and digging out some crackers, he sat on the counter and ate and listened. After a while he heard someone pull at that door between the store and the back of the house, and heard a muffled call, but he made no move. He didn't know how many were back there, and he wasn't taking chances.

A FEW minutes later Clint heard a step on the front porch. The store faced east. He had put some things in the window on the south side of the door, to make it dark, for that was where he had hidden the man. The counter where he was eating was on the north side. He now stepped quickly across, and stood behind a pile of blankets in the dark, southwest corner. Presently the front door opened. Two men entered, and closed it.

"Say, Calfus!" called one of the men, and of course there was no answer.

"Now where the hell do you suppose Calfus is at?"

"Dunno. Him and that feller was in here together. They must of went out to look at that saddle bronc that Calfus is always trying to trade to strangers that come along looking for things."

"Huh! It never taken Calfus that long to put a knife where it belonged, before. This thing don't look right to me."

"Maybe Cal's having some of that bad luck he's been talking about ever since we got in here."

"What bad luck?"

"Why, ain't you heard him roaring about it? He broke his horse's right hind leg. Old Foo Chee told him that if ever he broke that bronc's right hind leg, he'd have a lot of trouble."

"Huh! That's some of Chee's Chinese rot. He don't believe it himself. If Calfus don't get that girl across the river, and deliver her to Foo Chee, like he agreed to do, he'll have a whole lot worse luck than he would if he broke all four of that bronc's legs, and its neck throwed in."

"I believe you! I wanted to take her right on yesterday, cold or no cold, but Calfus said no. Wanted to deliver her himself. I don't think he trusts Mr. Chee very far, and five thousand bucks is right smart dough."

"Yes, but five thousand ain't much to Foo Chee, and then she's worth it. Prettiest thing I ever saw in my life, but a reg'lar little hell cat. I'll be glad when we get her out of here."

Clint was ready for anything, now. He had learned definitely that Mr. Calfus was Foo Chee's agent on the Texas side of the river. He had learned that Calfus had a playful habit of taking strangers out to look at a wonderful horse, and then knifing them in the back as they looked. He had learned, furthermore, that these two members of the Calfus gang were willingly helping to steal an American woman for the brutal Foo Chee. That was enough. Clint was fairly choking with rage.

"You fellows can put your hands up, high!" he called out from his dark corner.

He didn't expect them to obey the order, didn't want them to do it, and they played into his hand by going for their guns. There were two spurts of flame from Clint's corner, almost together, and an instant later, two less bandits to terrorize the border. Each had a bullet through his head. Clint Terry was taking no chances. He knew he was in a desperate corner, and was ready and willing to shoot his way out. He had no compunction whatever against killing any man in this gang. But, if there were ten of them, as Chuck had declared there were, he had only made a fair start, and the worst was yet to come.

Clint Terry usually carried one Colts .45, and that was all he had now. His carbine he had left on his saddle, and he had no notion of going out there after it, yet a while. He unbuckled the belt of one of the men on the floor, and found that the holster held a good forty-five. This he buckled on, and then pulled the other man's gun from the holster and held it in his hand. When the big show started, there was likely to be little enough time to reload. He threw the two empty shells out of his own gun, replaced them, and dropped the gun back in its holster, then stood listening intently.

Suddenly, someone set up a violent pounding on the door that led to the back room, and a man's voice called, but Clint couldn't make out what he said. Let them yell and pound. If they wanted any business with him, they'd have to come to the front door, like white folks. A few minutes later, a face was pressed against the window at the north side of the front door. Clint fired one shot, and saw the man fall. He realized his mistake as he was putting a fresh cartridge in his gun. No more men would come to the front. They'd see that one lying there, and keep away. He'd have to make the next move. Any way, that was four of them out of the game. There must be six more about the place.

ORDINARILY, Clint Terry wasn't a killer. It was his policy to take his man alive, when possible. He figured that in most cases there was a possibility of innocence, or at least extenuating circumstances, when a man was charged with a crime. He had known many such cases. But here was a case in which there could be no extenuating circumstances. These men could not have violated the law in self-defence. They were confessed criminals of the worst type. They had admitted stealing an American woman—in Clint's mind a Texas woman, and he was a Texas Ranger—for the avowed purpose of delivering her over to a short life that was worse than a thousand murders.

For the time, the Ranger was sheriff, court and executioner. His situation was desperate now. The other six brigands had him trapped there in the store, if they only knew it, and it wouldn't be long until they'd begin to investigate. It was only ten miles to the river. Two of them could take the girl out and away, while the other four held him there. After all, it was to save the girl that he was taking such desperate chances. To walk boldly out and face the six men would be little short of suicide. So far, luck had been with him, but luck, he knew only too well, had a pernicious habit of changing at the critical moment.

He'd guard against one eventuality, at least. The six might try to rush him through the front door of the store. He stole to it, closed it, and slipped the heavy bar in place. Then he stacked things in the other window, until the store was almost dark as a dungeon. An idea was beginning to form in his mind. He was going to get to the girl, and make it impossible for them to take her away—if they hadn't already done that. As he stood near the window, listening, he heard voices at the front of the store.

"What the merry hell do you suppose is going on in there?" asked a man's voice.

"Huh! It ain't hard to figger," replied another voice. "There lies Todd, with half his head shot off, and if anybody tried to go in there——"

"Let's take that girl out and get her away from here," proposed the first speaker.

"Yes, and get in bad with Calfus for the rest of our lives," drawled a third voice.

Clint didn't know how many men were out there, but he had heard three distinct voices, and knew there were that many. That would leave only three in the back. His idea was complete now. Stepping swiftly and noiselessly to that connecting door with his gun in his right hand, he threw the heavy hook from its staple and kicked the door wide, drawing another gun with his left hand at the same time. What he saw was a large, square room, with an open door letting in a flood of light at the north side. Diagonally across the room from him, and away from that open door, was another door, fastened on that side with the same sort of iron hook that had held the other. Directly between him and that door two men were seated at a table, a bottle and glasses between them.

As Clint kicked the door open, these two men sprang to their feet and reached for their guns, but they never got them. The Ranger was not taking the tiniest chance of their interfering with his plans. More than one bullet went into each of them, in a twinkling. As they fell, he sprang over their bodies for that closed door. He didn't know what was behind that door, but he had broken cover, and he couldn't stand there in that room, with the door

open, and four men outside. Reaching the door, he struck the hook up with the barrel of his gun, kicked the door open, and sprang through, just as guns roared at the open door, and a storm of lead swept diagonally into the door behind him.

There was no chance to close the door. Clint sprang to the right, because the door opened against the wall on the other side. He cast one glance around the room. There was one small window high in the end. In the dim light from it he could see a form on a bed, far back in the northeast corner, and against the partition wall that the door was in. He had barely time to crouch against the wall between the bed and the open door, when he heard voices out in the big room.

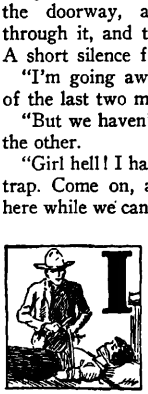
"Come on!" called one of the men. "There's only one in there; let's rush him!"

That man was braver than he knew. They rushed the door. The first two fell in the doorway, as their heads showed through it, and the other two gave back. A short silence followed.

"I'm going away from here," said one of the last two men left.

"But we haven't got the girl!" protested the other.

"Girl hell! I haven't lost any girl, in that trap. Come on, and let's get away from here while we can."



IN THE silence that followed, Clint heard them jump out the side door, and run toward the corral. Jerking out his knife, he cut the thongs that bound the girl's hands and feet, and removed the gag from her mouth.

"Rub your wrists and ankles," he commanded, "so they'll come alive. I'll be back in a minute."

Out through the big room he sped, and on through the store. Removing the bar from the front door he opened it a crack and peeped out. The corral was slightly to the front of the store, and two hundred yards away. The two men were frantically saddling their horses. Clint slipped out to where his own horse still stood in front of the store. He pulled his carbine from the saddle-scabbard, threw in a cartridge and squatted on the ground. Never in his life had he so hated to see men get away.

The gate flew open, and one of the outlaws dashed through on his horse. The carbine cracked, and the man pitched from his saddle. Clint worked the lever, but the shell stuck. He jerked at it savagely, and the shell ejected. Another cartridge went intc the chamber, but by that time the last man was out and riding hard. He was wise enough to turn his mount away from the store, and ride zigzag. Clint fired again, and the man ducked low on his horse's neck, but kept going. The Ranger fired again and again, but the distance was too great for the short-barreled gun.

Clint Terry watched the fleeing man eagerly. The direction he took meant much. If he turned back into the roughs, he might find reinforcements, and come back to make more trouble. Clint had already had enough and to spare. What he wanted now, more than anything else, was to get the girl out of there, and back to Palo Verde. If other battles were to be fought with the remnant of the Calfus gang, it would suit him best to fight them another day. But the man didn't turn. He struck the trail that led to the river, and spurred on in a cloud of dust. The Ranger's lips twisted in a grim smile. That meant that there were no more of the outfit on that side of the river. It was ten miles to where the trail crossed the Rio Grande. If there were others of the gang there, he would have a twenty mile start of them, for he meant to ride at once.

"Who—who are you?" demanded Lina Ray, when Clint called her, and she walked out into the big room.

"Nobody much," he replied. "Just a Texas Ranger. When did you eat anything?"

"Not since they took me away from home. I couldn't eat."

"You could eat now, couldn't you? You can't ride in that shape, and we got to ride, *pronto*. Sit down there. I'll take these fellows out of here, and then rustle some breakfast."

There was a cookstove in a corner of the big room, and on it was a pot of hot coffee. Breakfast over, Clint stepped

through the door into the store. He went to where Calfus lay, under the counter, and removed the blankets. The man was dead, and already stiffening. The Ranger looked him over.

"Just as well," he muttered to himself. "Saved me shooting a prisoner, and I never have done that yet."

He caught up a pair of men's trousers, a heavy duck coat, pair of boots, Stetson and chaps, and went back to where he had left the girl finishing her coffee.

"Put these things on," he commanded. "They may not fit, and look pretty, but it's cold out there, and we've got to get away from here. I'll go get the horses."

Clint Terry had taken several covert looks at Lina Ray, while she ate her breakfast, and decided that Chuck Thompson was right. She was just about the prettiest woman he had ever seen, and that beauty had come perilously near being her undoing. He made the mental note that Buck Ray must have been just about the reddest-headed man on earth. In spite of the fact that Lina's mother was Mexican, the girl's hair was a deep dark red, that accentuated her luminous brown eyes. In spite, also, of the fact that her face was dirty and tearstained, and there were great circles around her eyes, she was still lovely.

The horse that Clint had shot the man from had run back into the corral. He caught it, went back and got his own horse, and led them to the side door. Ten minutes later they rode away from that shambles. Anyone seeing them would have been ready to swear that he saw two men ride away from Ransleben's Store. They struck the trail, turned into the mouth of the gorge, and disappeared. It was thirty miles to Palo Verde, and they were getting a late start.

IN THE main room of a 'dobe shack, a mile back in the roughs from the trail, on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande, a man sat drumming his fingers on a rough table. He looked to be about forty years old. His hair and a thin, long mustache, were black as night. There was a peculiar slant to his snaky black eyes, and his dark skin had a yellowish cast. Here was Foo Chee. *El Chinesco Diabolo*—The Chinese Devil——the Mexicans called him, and well they might, for he had long levied heavy tribute on them. Outside the shack stood several saddled horses, and a little band of brigands squatting over a fire in another room.

Up from the trail staggered a reeling horse, all wet from a swim in the river, and trembling with cold and weariness. The rider dismounted stiffly, and stumbled toward the door of the hut, where a sentry stood.

"Bring him in!" commanded the bandit chieftain. "Maybe he knows something. What it is, you gringo thief?" Foo Chee was in a towering rage. "Why have I been kept waiting here for two days. Where is the girl?"

"I don't know, señor. I——"

"Don't know! Why are you here, if you don't know anything? Where's Calfus?"

"Dead, I think, señor."

"You think!" thundered Foo Chee. "Don't you know anything? Calfus had better be dead, when I see him again. Where are the others of your band?"

"All dead, señor."

"All dead! Did you fight the gringo army?"

"No, señor, only one man."

"One man! Who was he?"

"I don't know, señor. I think he was *El Diablo*. I got only two glimpses of him, but I never saw him before."

Foo Chee gave way to his rage, and the air was lurid with strange oaths.

"Calfus broke his horse's right hind leg the night of the raid," the messenger went on, when he subsided a bit. "He said you told him that when that happened he would have bad luck."

"Well, he had it, didn't he?" sneered the master bandit.

"*Si*, señor."

"All right. Now I'll make some good luck for some man of a little more sense than Calfus had. The senseless rabble in Palo Verde will talk. I'll give a thousand *pesos*, gold, to the first man who brings me the name of the gringo who killed my

agent and his men. Also, I will give ten thousand *pesos*, gold, to the band that will bring to me, unharmed, the body of Señorita Lina Ray."

Half an hour later Foo Chee, still seething with rage, and planning a terrible vengeance, led his men back through the hills to his mountain stronghold.

IT WAS after sunset when Clint Terry and Lina Ray reached the whitewashed *jacal* at the west end of Palo Verde's lone long street. The house was closed, and there was no one in sight.

"Perhaps your mother is at the *posada*," suggested Terry.

"She may be," replied Lina, wearily. "Antonio Torres is her cousin, and she often goes there."

At the little restaurant, Maria Ray went wild with delight. She clasped her daughter to her heart, and then releasing her, she knelt at Clint's feet and embraced his knees, groveling in her gratitude. The Ranger finally broke away from the embarrassing situation, but by that time the news had spread over the town like fire in dry grass, that the Great Clint Terry had rescued Lina Ray. Clint Terry's name was on every tongue. Foo Chee's agents would have no difficulty in learning the name of the gringo who had played such havoc with his cherished plans.

CLINT and Chuck Thompson sat by the big box stove in the Favorite Saloon, long after the town had quieted from the first transports of its praise of the Great Clint Terry. Clint hadn't spoken for half an hour. At last he looked up at Chuck.

"Let's take a night-cap, and call it a day, Chuck," he suggested.

Chuck went behind the bar and set out his private bottle and two glasses.

"Just a minute, Clint, before we take this drink. I got to know something, or it's going to choke me to death."

"What is it?"

"How'd you ever get the lead that Foo Chee was in on this mess? I believe now that you can see the wheels turning in my head, but they were not turning about Foo Chee, for I never had thought about him being mixed into the deal."

"That pile of broken glass, that you were sweeping up when I came in yesterday morning, told me."

"Aw, hell! Broken glass can't talk."

"It can if you know how to listen," and Clint took out his pocketbook, opened it, and laid a tiny object on the bar.

"That looks like glass, but—but it ain't!" said Chuck. "It's got a funny, shiny, glossy look."

"Yes, that's what made me notice it, in the edge of that pile of glass. Pick it up and look at it closely."

"Gosh! It's a horse's hind foot, hair, hoof, fetlocks and all. Shows plumb plain, little as it is. Well, I'll be——"

Clint drew his hand from his pocket, and set a tiny green jade horse on the polished bar. It was perfect in every detail, even to ruby eyes, except that the right hind foot was gone. He fitted the little piece in place, and it was perfect.

"That little thing just happened to catch my eye, when I slipped up behind you yesterday morning. I knew it wasn't glass, and when you turned your back I picked it up. After I heard that a woman had been stolen, I took a look at the thing, by accident, and found that it was a wonderful Chinese carving of a horse's foot. Then I began putting things together. Either Foo Chee, or some trusted agent, carried that charm. It was a sort of idol, a little god that brought luck. It was never meant for a watch charm, but that vain fool, Calfus, wore it as one. I was satisfied the piece I had was broken from something on some of the men that looted the town. When I went to Ransleben's Store this morning, all I hoped to get was a little information. Then, when I saw that charm on Calfus' watch chain, with its ruby eyes, and the right hind leg gone, I knew I had found the gang I was after. I've told you the rest, and that's all."

"Shore, and that's a-plenty!" said Chuck, raising his glass. "Here's happy days to the man that can understand when broken glass talks!"

DAN'S TEMPER

By E. E. HARRIMAN
Author of "Texas Men and Texas Cattle," "Six-Gun Quarantine," etc.

It took cruelty to arouse that temper of Dan McGray's—cruelty to man or horse—and decidedly bad business it was to arouse it, as more than one callous ruffian learned to his sorrow

DAN was only a cowboy, but he was unique in several ways. He made a friend of every horse he rode for any length of time and he had patience almost inexhaustible. Most men who knew him said Dan never had a temper until he caught Giles being deliberately cruel to a horse. Then they had to admit that he had one or a passable substitute for one. It took two months and a few days for Giles to recover enough to appear in court against Dan McGray, but when he did so appear, there were many horsemen present to hear the trial. Dan had no witnesses, but he told his story to the court and not a man present doubted one word of it.

"I haven't nothin' to say, Judge, other than that I ketched him in the act an' when that hoss rolled his eyes to look at me an' groaned so pleadin' like, my temper riz an' I jest had to give this here skunk what he needed. I ain't sorry a mite an' if I ever ketch him er ary other man treatin' a hoss thataway agin, I'm plumb li'ble to act jes' like I done this time. I got a turrible temper, Judge. It's plumb bad times I see somethin' like this. What's the damage, Judge? Assess it an' I'll be proud to pay. If I kain't hold my temper down, I gotta ante fer it—an' I just couldn't hold in that time, do my best I couldn't."

"It does look that way, Dan," said Judge Cornell. "It is the court's judgment that you did a good job. Case dismissed. Goodby, Dan. Call in and see me when you have time, Dan. Always glad to see you. Call next case, Mr. Clerk. Giles, take warning by what you suffered."

Five cattlemen offered to hire Dan before he left the town that day, but he declined every job offered. He had been saving his money for the last six years and putting it into calves, thinking to make a start at stock raising, but now he had concluded to move to another section. His little herd of young stock would bring him a fair sum and he had heard of a place that suited him much better. His early life had been spent in a forested country and he had missed seeing trees; tired of landscapes all grass and small brush. Hearing of the oak openings between the Gila and Santa Maria, he had concluded to migrate. It was less hot there in summertime, there was more water and the feed was good, he had been told. So now he sold his stock, mounted his horse Cricket and started.

Dan rode north very slowly, letting

Cricket walk continuously, save when the horse showed an impatient desire to lope on a level stretch or down a slight grade. On steep pitches Cricket had to use judgment, for Dan did not approve of knee-sprung horses, considered them a sure proof of idiocy on the part of the rider. Yet he and Cricket would travel on a down-grade as recklessly as any horse and rider in America, if it was a case of necessity, but always after such a dash Dan looked after the knees of Cricket with great anxiety. Between horse and man was perfect understanding and Dan could, if need be, go to sleep under Cricket with as little fear of being stepped on as though he were in bed.

"If yer hoss don't know you're his friend, you ain't no real rider or even a decent man," Dan would assert. "A hoss that's been treated right is glad to be friendly. Oh, I ain't sayin' there isn't exceptions, any more'n I would say they ain't no criminals among men."

Jogging along his way, sleeping out nights in a cowboy bedroll he packed on old Grimes, a tough old mule that had a great affection for Cricket, Dan finally came near to the south limit of the country sought. His heart warmed to see a grove of oaks through which cattle trails ran to a little springhole. This hole was shaped like a balloon, at the tail end of which a constant trickle of clear water flowed from a ledge to keep the granite bowl filled. Now he began to look for a house.

"That spring will keep a hundred head of stock watered; mebbe twice that," he told Cricket. "It ain't at all likely the stockmen don't use it. Somebody is layin' claim to that water or else folks is crazy here. If I'm comin' into country where they have enough water to let this go to waste, I'm in heaven."

DAN rode through the oaks along a cattle trail, until he came out to an open meadow, where a band of about two dozen cows were grazing, with their young calves staggering about in knock-kneed fashion. The cows all stared at the horse and packmule in their usual bovine curiosity, going back to their search for uncropped grass before he had crossed the vale and entered the grove beyond, sure evidence that they had not been hazed much, especially of late. Dan grinned at their calm survey.

"Plumb gentle," he remarked to Cricket. "Don't hightail fer other parts a-tall, like most critters does. Cricket, this here place is shore peaceful. Looks like a good place to bed down an' stay. Good grass an' a plenty of trees, water enough fer a small herd. Yep, it looks good."

A climb of a gentle slope that brought him to a ridge of perhaps forty feet elevation above the meadow showed Dan a roof in the distance, partly hidden by two oak trees. He headed for it. As he rode nearer he saw the house quite plainly, unpainted, squat and square. Near it a round old corral that looked older than he—and Dan had passed his twenty-sixth birthday eight months ago. It was a safe bet that the house had not felt a painter's brush since Dan learned to ride, perhaps not since it first grew into shape. Weathered, cracked, wind-beaten and sun-dried, it stood as a representative cowman's shack of the poorer class, advertising the fact that its owner had never risen far in the climb toward wealth.

As Dan drew near the door opened and an old man hurried out, with a look of fury on his face as he hobbled swiftly toward the corral. In a hand dangled a heavy Winchester 45-90, and around his withered old body hung a belt supporting a huge revolver. The armament, taken with that red fury of face, made a complete picture of aged wrath, not yet impotent.

The old man looked at Dan as he rode up, stopped and gave a grave and respectful salutation. He did not speak, even when Dan hailed him, as his emotions so controlled him that his almost toothless mouth could not articulate.

"I don't want to poke my nose in where it ain't welcome," Dan said, "but you look agitated an' warlike. No man of your age gits thataway on account of small matters, so I'm jest askin' ye kin I be of any use?"

"Who be ye? Where from an' why?" snapped the old man at last.

"Dan McGray. From down nigh the border. Because I done heard of a coun-

try up here covered with oak trees an' was borned in a oak grove."

"You look honest. Aire ye?" the old man asked. "Fool question, but I'm so mad I bleat like a calf. Go in the house an' talk to Ma. Then I kin git her opinion. Mebbe she'll tell ye what ails us. I kain't."

He turned away to saddle a horse that blinked at him from within the corral. Dan glanced back from the house steps and saw this horse walk to meet his owner, and the sight made him glad, gave him trust. He did not see the keen old eyes take in how Cricket followed to the steps, after Dan had dismounted and gone to the door.

An old woman answered his knock, her face still wet with tears, and Dan began to feel his temper stirring. Somebody had made this old couple unhappy and his own spirit rose in resentment of the fact.

"Ma'am, I'm Dan McGray, from 'way down nigh the border, ridin' to find a place to locate where I kin see trees. I spoke to your man down here an' he tol' me to come talk to you an' mebbe you'd tell me what makes ye both look sorrowful an' mad, together," and Dan paused for a reply.

To his surprise the woman looked right past him at Cricket, whose honest eyes watched her and his master. She swung the door clear back and as she did so looked at the old man who had mounted. He nodded with a sharp decisiveness, and her face cleared. Then she looked at Dan.

"Come on in or talk here, just as you like. I am Ma Driscoll, and that is my man, Ed Driscoll. We built this house when we got married, 'way back afore you was born. Pa he filed on Balloon Springs an' started out with fourteen cows. This year we thought we was gettin' too old to run cattle any longer, an' we sold the stock to the BBL ranch. Then a gang held Pa up this mornin' on his way home with the cash."

SHE stopped to wipe the tears that gushed at the memory.

"We figgered on buyin' bonds an' livin' right here in comfort. That money would pay us eighty a month fer life an' that would be wealth fer folks like us, but now the money is all gone, our stock belongs to BBL ranch and we haven't a thing only this house an' twenty acres of land, with the water Pa piped from a smaller spring up on yon ridge."

Again the old face worked pitifully and she wiped her eyes.

"Pa is seventy-eight an' I'm seventy-four an' us left flat broke. I dunno what we're a-goin' to do, 'pon my soul I don't. Pa he's about as nigh bein' crazy as a man kin be an' still be half way rational. Just the same, he's keen enough to read the way your hoss followed ye after you 'lighted. Didn't ye see him nod to me emphatic? I liked the way your hoss watches ye, an' Pa give me the signal he liked it too. I'll take the word of the hoss that you're all right. He's not half as apt to lie to me as a human. That's why I'm talkin' free to ye."

Dan turned to look at his horse, and Cricket gave a soft whicker.

"Look at that now! He loves ye," the woman exclaimed.

"I hope he does, ma'am. Like you say, ma'am, a hoss is honest. What is Mr. Driscoll aimin' to do, startin' out that-away, all loaded up with guns? Does he plan trailin' them hold-up men?"

"Yes. I'm afraid he'll run acrost 'em and git shot full of holes."

"In that case, ma'am, I'll ketch up with him and send him back."

Wheeling, Dan took the steps at a stride, mounted with a swinging vault without touching a stirrup and went up the road at a high lope, the packmule galloping after. He overtook Pa Driscoll and stopped him.

"Lookahere, Driscoll, you turn right around an' go back to Ma," began his tirade. "You ain't a-goin' to leave her a widder yet a while. Don't ye know them bandits will recognize you at sight an' shoot ye?"

"Mebbe, but there'll be more'n one gun a-talkin' when they do."

"You ol' idiot, there'll be more'n one bandit shootin' at you, you mean. You're desprit now an' I don't blame ye, but you gotta consider Ma in your figgerin'. Trot along back to her an' leave me the contrack. I ain't a livin' relative as fur as I know, an' the deuce of it is nobody loves

me, so I ain't expectin' to have a wife to worry over me. Now you git busy an' give me ev'ry doggoned thing you noticed on them men an' their hosses. How many men? Three? About how old?"

"The leader looked like he might be forty-eight er fifty, had some gray hairs in front of his ears. His chin showed scatterin' gray stubs where it stuck out below his mask. He rode a dark straw'b'ry roan with cracked hoof on the off front side. One of the other men was Mex or a Injun. His neck was bare an' looked young. You know what I mean, brown an' leathery, but smooth an' full, with a thin li'le scar about an inch or inch an' a quarter long, like somebody tried to stick him an' failed to git the knife in fur enough. That was on the left side, which makes it all the more likely. The third son-of-a-gun had red hair, foxy, yellowish red, and the first joint gone off his gun hand little finger.

"Oh, yes! The leader was pockmarked along his jaw an' below it. The roan hoss wore a Rafter L brand on left shoulder; the black under the Mex was a Arrow brand hoss an' t'other feller forked a buckskin wearin' a Bar Z. Probably the hosses was stole, but them's the brands."

"Rafter L, Arrow brand and the Bar Z. Roan, black and buckskin. Dark or light buckskin? An' did ye notice the saddles?"

"Not much, but the leader set a Silver City bit of leather, square bastos an' plain hoghide horn. Both t'other fellers had metal horns."

"All right. Now you lope fer home an' comfort Ma. I'm runnin' the hunt fer them three. Keep shut about me. Don't let anybody know you see me or talked with me. I'm a stranger up hereaway, now an' fer-ever, until I choose to let folks know me. *Hasta luego, abuelo!*"

"But I dunno what call we have to let you run risks fer us."

"Mebbe not, but I got a turrible temper an' I'm mad an' gittin' more so ev'ry minute. Now you jest scoot fer home, granpaw, an' let Dan do it. How fur an' which way is the nearest town?"

"Sixteen mile the way you're headin' now."

"All right. Don't tell anybody you been robbed, remember. Nobody."

"*De seguro,* you pore darn fool! I love ye fer it, but you hain't got sense, hoppin' into trouble thisaway. Ma, she'll pray fer ye."

"*Bueno!* Then them bandits is up agin it hard. *Adios!*"

DAN rode on into the town, which contained only about a hundred and fifty inhabitants, but sported a bank, a gambling house, dance-hall and a saloon, the last two under the same roof, the gambling den snuggling close to the barroom in a separate building. Dan left his horse and mule at a hitchrack in front of the general store, fifty feet away from the first of the three joints, and walked over to the saloon. He preferred to leave Cricket where stray bullets were less likely to target in his body.

"Ary place in town where a cowboy kin hang up fer a week er so?" he asked the bartender. "I'm from down near the border an' plumb strange in Yavapai. Ain't got no great amount of money, but I kin ante fer a few days of repose, if the room ain't much worse than sleepin' out."

"There's Old Lady Griffin's place an' Butch Taylor's. Butch runs the gamin' tables next door an' the Griffin dame she has the high-toned place where the schoolma'am boards. Either place is good. Depends on the kind of sassiety you prefer, he men or skirts."

"I'm skirt shy ever since a Mex señorita stole a month's wages off me while I was stealin' a kiss from her. Didn't look like a square deal to me, fer her kisses weren't worth no forty bucks, bein' a heap shop-worn an' soiled from too much handlin'. I'll see Butch."

Dan found Butch a smooth sort, with a cultivated style of posing as hearty and of a generous nature, but three hours watching convinced him that there was not a square game in the place. Moreover, he decided that nothing could induce him to trust Butch to the extent of two cents. He was artificially a good fellow, but his light blue eyes, almost milky, had the appraising look of a purely predatory nature. Dan held, with police statistics, that the

worst criminals, the most cruelly savage and cunning felons, wore eyes like those of Butch; and when he studied those eyes in odd moments, when the man was not posing, he knew him for a villain.

Dan risked a few dollars at faro and roulette, then drew out of the games and watched others. He had been allowed to win, that he knew well. There was a reason and Dan knew what it was, since he had with apparent carelessness exposed his roll when stripping off a bill to pay room rent in advance. He kept his face as barren of intelligence as possible, but inside he was laughing to think how he had worked the gambler for a free room for a week. There was no manner of doubt in his mind that Butch so loved that roll that he would risk the lives of two or three of his men to take it from Dan. Not his own life. Not by any manner of means. Dan had him sized up to a gnat's heel as one who did his dirty work through other men altogether, much to his own profit.

Playing the innocent cowboy, innocent in the sense of not knowing a crooked game if well handled, Dan made it a point to bet a little on each game in the place, at long intervals, beginning with an eagerness of manner that fooled the houseman into thinking that this was to be the time when he would spread his roll and watch it vanish. But every time he turned cautious after winning a dollar or two, in two cases after the first night as much as five dollars. A week of this and they grew hard and cold toward him, so Dan merely looked on and paid for another week in his room. He had watched carefully for the men described by Driscoll.

SITTING in his room one night he summed up to determine how much he had learned since he left Driscoll. He had played pinochle with the man who owned or rode a buckskin horse occupying a stall in the stable that night. It was a Bar Z horse, well trained and showing signs Dan had no trouble in reading as a fast one on his feet. The fellow acted the part of a stranger fairly well, but Dan had marked a look that passed between this man and Butch. As he read it, that look warned the new man and he interpreted it. Most men would not have noticed the slight hitch of an incompleted step, but Dan knew instantly that the pale blue eyes had halted the fellow in the middle of a stride and sent him aside. As the newcomer tipped his hat on the back of his head, Dan perceived that he had lost the first joint of a little finger.

Half an hour later another man entered, nodded at Butch, muttered a short sentence as he passed and sought the stud table. Now Dan did some little thinking, and a scattered few pockmarks on the last man's jaw had a part in his cogitations. Right then Dan would have bet his roll that Butch knew both men intimately. The longer he studied the matter of the two rascals the more convinced he was that there was an understanding between them and the gambler. He would learn what he could of the pair and perhaps he might happen on some information worth having.

Carelessly, like one who had grown weary of watching others play, he went on across the room to a table and sat down. It was the keno table, in charge of a slim young fellow who wore his hair in a great mop that fell over his brow and almost concealed his eyes. Sleepy-eyed, yawning at intervals, this fellow was yet one of the most alert, skilled and ruthless of the gang who aided Butch in skinning the public. His sleepy look was deliberately assumed. The pockmarked villain occupied the chair at Dan's left. An hour passed quickly and Dan was less than ten dollars in the hole, but the man at his left had lost nearly a hundred and cursed loudly.

"Don't cry, baby," said the man behind the keno table, sneeringly.

The man beside him shifted position swiftly and his gun came above the table elge, but the dealer had drawn a derringer from his sleeve and had the fellow covered before the gun could be thrown level.

"Butch!" yelped the dealer. "Take your carrion out of here!"

The gambler's response was instant and his hand disarmed the man of the pockmarks. At the same time he snarled reproof.

"Keep your private quarrels out of here, you two."

The dealer looked up at Butch and spoke coolly, with venom.

"I'm calling you both on that. The next time he goes for his gun, I'll furnish you the makin's of a funeral, Butch. No man living can do that twice with me, I don't care how much he is worth to you."

The insolent dealer and Butch glared at each other in silence for a moment, neither willing to be the first to relax. Then the pockmarked one got to his feet and pushed past Butch, taking his gun as he passed. His body in passing cut off Butch from the view of the dealer and then both men were on their way to the farther end of the room. The dealer sneered, hummed a bar from a song and turned to his game once more.

Dan pushed his chair back and left the room, pondering a phrase. "I don't care how much he is worth to you," held a meaning that he caught and kept in his memory. So there really was a union between Butch and this fellow, and the keno man knew it. Dan began to hope greatly.

Nobody knew that he had ever met the Driscolls and, as far as he knew, nobody save the thieves knew they had been robbed. He wanted to be sure on that point, and in the middle of the night he mounted and rode to the weathered old house, woke Pa Driscoll and in darkness whispered a question through a window. The old man fairly sputtered an answer.

"Not a word to ary human, have we, Ma?" and her voice confirmed it.

"Well, don't ye, not fer a thousand bucks," and their caller left.

THE following day Dan rode off to the northwest and spent his time in hunting for a job, though he actually looked for something else. Men of a mahogany color, who carry throat scars like stab wounds, are not too common to excite comment and he had heard of a large ranch where many riders worked. Three men in town had mentioned this ranch and the widow who owned it with her two sons. These three were good and reliable men, Dan believed, and they spoke well of the widow and her boys.

"Ask a question of her or the boys and you get a straight answer," the merchant had said. "You can gamble on them every time."

Other men had given other statements, but they all tended toward one thing, the trustworthiness of the mother and sons. Dan decided to go there, find one of the sons, tell him the truth and ask questions. He did not return to his lodgings that night, and not until almost sunset next day was Cricket seen ambling up to the stable. Dan whistled "La Paloma" while he cared for his horse and gear. He was happy tonight and showed it.

"Went out t'day an' roped me a job," he told the stableman. "Goin' to work next Monday fer the Triangle B. Got t' do my hell-raisin' this week, fer they tell me I'll be too busy after that to more'n eat, sleep an' ride. I'm expectin' to make this a large evenin', if anybody asks ye. I got the makin's of a humdinger in a belt around my belly."

"Butch will be mighty willin' to help ye empty that belt," laughed the stableman. "He's jest about the most willin' worker thataway I ever see. Always was an' always will be, I reckon."

Dan went to his room and waited until hungry time, then drifted to the dining-room. Passing a window, he saw the stableman leaving Butch's place with a grin on his face and knew the gambler would be set to get the contents of that belt. He had no doubt that the stableman had told the gambler what he, himself, had said an hour before, and he smiled as he thought of what was coming.

Butch received Dan that evening with so much of apparent delight that the man from the border might have believed himself popular there had he not understood thoroughly that his money, not his personality, was the attraction. Affecting the manners of a flattered clown, Dan patted his façade and grinned in a delighted fashion.

"Watch out, Butch! I'm givin' ye warnin' I aim to take away a heap of your cash t'night. I'm buckin' the tiger an' the bear-cat both. When I kain't say 'Keno!' quick enough to win, I'll s'render the roll. I got

good eyes an' a limber tongue, well 'iled. I feel lucky t'night."

"That's good. If you get tired of keno, there's the faro bank to be busted. If you break the bank you break me, for it carries a plenty hard cash tonight. Where were you last night? We missed you."

"Oh, I fooled around until late and spent my time gabbin' with two ol' folks, an' when it got late, they insisted on my stayin' over night. You know the Driscolls, do ye? Live out here sixteen er seventeen mile."

"I've heard of them. Didn't someone rob the old man a while ago? I faintly remember hearing about it, though I ain't quite clear about the circumstances. How much did the old man lose? I suppose he told you."

"He didn't say right out. Looked sorta desprit an' cussed strong, but didn't open his mouth about the exact amount," said Dan, his eyes a hard, brilliant pair of polished stones, as he saw the pockmarked man in the doorway, with the man who had lost a fingerjoint looking over his shoulder. "There's two of yer friends lookin' in at ye, sorta bashful."

BUTCH looked at the pair who entered at the moment, gave them a nod and turned again to Dan, who went on talking, speaking distinctly.

"Yeah, Old Man Driscoll was some savage an' swears he'll do some killin', as old as he is, if he ever meets up with them hold-up men. Says he kin swear to ev'ry dang one of 'em. One Mex, with a stab wound scar on his throat, one white son-of-a-gun that's minus a finger joint an' a——"

He stopped talking as two guns flashed upward from holsters in unison, and five men who were partly in line dived aside in quick panic and with perfect unanimity. The guns roared and Dan answered them from a reclining position on top of Butch, whose feet he had swept from under him with his own left. The attacking guns were talking fast as Dan went down, but they stopped abruptly. The pockmarked man had doubled forward with a bullet in his middle, and his mate had dropped his weapon, to grab his face with both hands and reel against the wall, his lower jaw almost swept away by Dan's lead. Now Dan jammed his gun in the ribs of the gambler and took a gun from his hand.

"Gents," he said, rising, "excuse me if I bust up the festivities so early in the evenin', but you all see them two draw afore I showed a weapon. Likewise, at least four of ye heard Butch mention Driscoll's havin' been robbed. It jest happens that nobody but the Driscolls an me, outside of the robbers, even knowed the old man got helt up. If I kin trouble some of ye to take a paper out'n my money belt an' read it out loud, we may git enlightened some as to why an' wherefore this here gunplay. One er two of ye keep the keno man from leavin'."

Two ranchers stepped forward, opened the money belt and took out a paper folded long and narrow. One opened this and read it, with the other looking over his shoulder and reading silently.

This paper certifies that we, the undersigned, having promised him immunity, have induced Pablo Guiterrez to confess having participated in the hold-up and robbery of Pa (John P.) Driscoll on the seventh day of the current month. Said Pablo Guiterrez testifies further that he was one of three concerned in this robbery, the others being Arkansaw Jack Bell, identified by pockmarks on jaw and neck, and Memphis Pete Clarey, whose right little finger is minus the first joint.

Pablo says further, that the robbery was perpetrated at the order and suggestion of Butch Taylor, who received sixty per cent of the cash and took the rest away from the actual robbers through his gambling games and devices, almost entirely.

Signed
Bartlett Brothers, Dick & Don.
The Triangle B Ranch

"Now ask the keno man what he meant by saying 'I don't care how much he is worth to ye,' said Dan. "My devilish temper is risin'."

"No need to ask. I'll answer now," said the young rascal behind the keno table. "I overheard talk between Butch and Arkan-

saw Jack Bell. I kept still because I hated Butch and planned to bleed him a bit."

"Gents, I reckon that explains things complete, an' now I'm insistin' on havin' Butch hand over the plunder. You will find Pa Driscoll's item on the back of that paper, givin' the exact amount stole from him."

The committee of two looked at the notation and Dan prodded Butch with a cocked gun, as he glared into those pale eyes.

"Butch, I got a turrible temper an' its r'arin' on its hind laigs. You got jest fifteen seconds to begin countin' out Driscoll's money."

Five minutes later Dan stuffed the entire amount in his pockets.

"I hain't got no more int'rust in you ner your doin's. The folks that live in this burg kin settle your hash fer all I care," said Dan. "I'm keepin' your short forty-five fer my Sunday gun an' fer good luck. Pablo is bein' escorted acrost the county line, with orders to git back into Mexico *muy pronto* and never show his face in Arizona agin, under a lead penalty. T'other agents of your'n is sp'iled fer future use. Turn around, you double damned beast. I kain't hold in no longer."

His left hand whirled Butch and his right leg moved swiftly. Into the person of the gambler it delivered two prodigious kicks.

"I'm satisfied," said Dan.

EXPRESS ROBBERS

By K. F. RICHARDS

ON JANUARY 1, 1885, Mr. J. B. Hume, famous Wells, Fargo & Co. detective, reported to the company the data concerning express robberies, number of hold-ups, men injured or killed, and other records of extreme interest covering a period of fourteen years, from November 5, 1870, which report was published in the San Francisco *Examiner* of that date. It was during that space of time that many of the noted desperadoes and highwaymen levied toll on the stages.

The whole amount taken from the company during that time was $415,312.55. The rewards paid for arrest and conviction of stage robbers was $73,451 (this included percentage on treasure recovered). The attorney's fees for assisting in the prosecution of the bandits was $22,367; while the incidental expenses during those years caused by the train and coach robbers who preyed on the company was $90,079. The wages of guards and special officers was $326,517; thus we have a total of $927,726.55.

Number of stages robbed during the fourteen years, 313; number of attempted stage robberies during the same time, 34. Train robberies, 4; attempted train robberies, 4. Number of convictions for stage robbery and attempted stage robbery, 206. Number of convictions for train robbery and attempts, 16. Number of convictions for burglary during the time, 14.

An interesting portion of the report is that dealing with the shotgun messengers and bandits who peppered each other. The number of Wells, Fargo guards killed while in the discharge of their duty by stage robbers, 2, Andy Hall, August 20, 1882, en route from Florence to Globe, A. T., and John Collins, August 10, 1883, on the same route. There were six guards wounded in that period while four drivers were killed and a like number were wounded. The passengers kept even with the drivers, 4 being killed, but only two wounded.

The death toll of the bandits was heavier, indicating that the guards were pretty good shots. Five stage robbers bit the dust while in the act of stopping stages; eleven were killed while resisting arrest, and seven passed to the far beyond at the end of a rope. Seven horses were killed and thirteen stolen from the various stage teams during the fourteen years.

Considering that the loot averaged a trifle over $1,300 for each robbery, stage coach hold-ups did not pay very well. Thirty-three deaths during that time indicates it was an unhealthy business from the standpoint of the guard, passenger, driver and bandit.

THE DROWNED RAT

By J. D. NEWSOM

Author of "The Honor of the Legion," "Gentlemen of the Legion," etc.

Debaets, the bully, made a great mistake when he picked on tough little Spike Wallis, a scrapper who could not forget and who trod the vengeance trail through the fiercest hell the Foreign Legion could devise

DEBAETS didn't mean to do any harm. Of course not! Such men never do. His sole purpose in bedeviling Spike Wallis was to amuse No. 5 Platoon. He was a big, bluff fellow with a close-cropped, pinkish bullet head, and one of those countenances which are called "open." It was open all right: open-mouthed, open-eyed, wide eared. Nothing missing. He had a genial manner and a hearty laugh. And he was something of a fool, although it took a long time to find out just what kind of a mean, cunning fool he really was. At first glance he appeared to be devoid of all malice—simple and kind-hearted.

He had less than a month's service in the ranks of the Foreign Legion when Spike turned up, and already he was one of the most popular men in the company. He had money, which he spent freely, and quite early he had learned the trick of "sweetening" both his corporal's and his sergeant's coffee with twenty-franc notes. He managed this very discreetly, so that nobody's feelings were hurt—least of all the feelings of Sergeant Dimitri Crangu, who had a thirst for white wine which he could never slake on his army pay.

The rank and file of the Foreign Legion draws down twenty-five centimes a day, or something less than one cent American, and any man with independent means who drifts into that outfit is assured of instant popularity, provided, of course, he doesn't keep his cash to himself.

Debaets made good use of his money: he got old man Giessen to black his boots for him, and Zuchetti made his bed and washed his white fatigue uniforms. He paid them fifty centimes a day, and everybody admitted that he was being very generous. Even the few troopers who didn't like him avoided an open breech for, in the first place, he was a long-armed, heavy shouldered brute who looked as if he could hit and hit hard, and, in the second place, each time a postal order reached him he stood drinks around at the canteen, and no trooper in his right senses was going to cut himself off from such a steady flow of wine.

There was a good deal of mystery about who Debaets might be. On that subject he was mute, and all sorts of rumors were

drifting around. Some said he was the broker who had been implicated in the Chavonne scandal, and others maintained he was a Hollander who had come to grief at Ostend. Debaets smiled and said nothing. One thing was certain, he was well above the average run of recruits who find their way into the Legion. He was well educated; he spoke French, Flemish and English—and Sergeant Crangu told him more than once that, given a little time, he was sure to earn rapid promotion.

"Men like you are scarce," Crangu declared. "Men of intelligence—just the kind we need. You watch: in another six weeks, maybe, we'll have you in this training squad for corporals. That suit you?"

Debaets agreed that it suited him, and that evening the sergeant found a hundred-franc note tucked away beneath his pillow: sweetening.

S A matter of fact, Debaets was the second son of Monsieur Emile Debaets, the Antwerp cigarette manufacturer. He should have grown up to be a conservative, heavy-jowled burgher, but some kink in his character sent him straight to the dogs.

Oh, nothing out of the ordinary: just the usual minor wickednesses. Champagne and ponies and ladies of the chorus. While it lasted he had what he considered a wonderful time, although his father refused to support him when he flew the coop and went to Paris on the trail of Mlle. Ninette Something-or-other. Her name is really unimportant. However, no money—no Ninette; and Debaets was so enthusiastic about her that he forthwith forged his father's name. It worked. He did it again. Then he practiced the signatures of his father's business associates and came to grief.

Even his immediate relatives were so horrified that they threatened to have him arrested if he did not do away with himself within twenty-four hours. They were a stiff-necked crew, with not an ounce of pity in their hearts, although it must be admitted Debaets had done his best to make pity impossible.

He allowed himself to toy with a revolver for exactly thirty seconds; then, still in a cold sweat, he walked over to the *Bureau Militaire* and enlisted in the Legion. Five years' absence, he felt sure, would bring complete forgiveness. He would then be thirty-two and ready to enjoy life. And the whole nasty business would be forgotten.

His surmise had been more than justified. In a week his sorrowing people repented and poured money into his lap, begging him to desert or to buy his way out of the Legion.

But he did not desert, for that would have been risky. In his coarse way he was much amused by the frantic letters which accompanied the postal orders, and he decided that he could well afford to spend five years in the army. It was great fun, and he was sure that in a little while he would land a comfortable clerical job, which would keep him safely tucked away at the depot. Already he had started an affair with a Maltese girl which promised to be interesting.

Barrack-room life suited him down to the ground. In under a month he was quite at home, and kept the whole platoon amused with his ponderous wit and his practical jokes. He was careful not to interfere with his seniors, but with newcomers he was merciless. He put them through their paces and roared with delight when they came to grief. It did them a world of good—so he said. Afterward, when they had been thoroughly initiated and there was no more fun to be had out of them, he would take them over to the canteen and fill them up with red wine.

He went too far for his own good, however, when he tackled Spike Wallis.

SPIKE was a short, spare man with a shock of reddish brown hair, whose face seemed to have been chipped out of a lump of flint. He had gray-blue eyes set deep in their sockets beneath thick, wiry brows which flared up toward the temples, a thin streak of a mouth with almost bloodless lips, and a cauliflower ear.

He was quiet and self-possessed and

was absolutely devoid of nerves. Anyone but a fool would have given him a wide, wide berth, but Debaets was a fool, and a braggart in the bargain.

Spike landed in the Legion after an eventful career. He had made quite a name for himself at the Star Sporting Club over in Brooklyn, and had gone to Europe to gather in a few more scalps. France, however, was too much for him. Everything went wrong. There was the booze, of course, and that played merry hell with his training.

He lost three fights on points; had an altercation with a French manager who had gypped him; tried to stage a comeback to pick up enough money to pay his fare home—and ran into all sorts of trouble. There was a violent row because he refused to frame the fight; the promoter became hysterical and threatened him with a revolver. In the course of the ensuing brawl the revolver went off, and Spike was accused of the murder of a French sportsman who was present.

That was the end of Spike's ring career. He was too disgusted with himself to bother about trying to clear up the mess. But he didn't want to land in a French prison, so after dodging about France for a time, and starving, and seeing lying accounts about himself in the papers, he enlisted in the Legion, and bade good-by to the old life once and for all.

EVENTUALLY he reached Sidi bel Abbes, the yellow city of flies and dust, which is the home of the First Regiment of the Foreign Legion. It was mid-July and flaming hot.

It took hours of standing about and being brayed at, and being inspected, and marching hither and yon before all the formalities were completed and he reached the barrack-room to which he had been assigned. His arms were full of bedding, uniforms, boots, and underwear; he was very hot, sticky, tired—and in no mood to be bothered.

Debaets, who was sitting on the edge of his bed oiling his rifle, saw the new man come staggering in behind a bulging load, and promptly tripped him up. He fell over sideways and struck his head on the leg of the table standing in the aisle between the two rows of cots.

"Haw-haw!" guffawed Debaets, smacking his thigh. "Haw-haw!"

And several of his particular cronies, including old man Giessen, laughed long and loud.

Spike lay face downward for a moment on top of his scattered kit, for the blow had dazed him.

"Now then," ordered the corporal who had Spike in tow, "leave him alone, Debaets. Give him a chance to turn around."

"Certainly, Corporal, certainly!" agreed Debaets. "That's just what I wanted him to do. He came in here with his blankets over his head. Scared me to death. Why, he might have been a ghost!"

And he shuddered, much to the amusement of his room-mates. There was nobody like Debaets to play the clown and keep everybody amused. Good old Debaets with his open countenance and his ready grin!

Meanwhile Spike had struggled to his feet, and was looking at Debaets with a perplexed frown between his eyes.

"Who tripped me up?" he inquired in his vile French. "You?"

"Ah-ha!" cried Debaets. "Every day we grow more and more cosmopolitan; Belgians we have with us, and Germans and Russians, not to speak of a wild Albanian, and now comes a what is it—an Englishman or an American?"

"Yes," admitted Spike, fingering the bruise on his forehead, "I am an American. You sent me sprawling, did you?"

"None other," Debaets declared with a mock bow.

He became aware all at once of the queer, hard glitter in Spike's eyes, and he was more amused than ever. He liked recruits to show a little fight: it made matters much more lively.

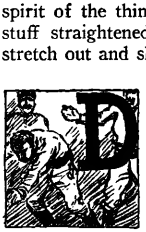
"Species of a camel," he went on truculently, "learn to respect your elders. I sent you sprawling for your own good; to teach you to stand squarely planted on both your feet as a Legionnaire should. Does that satisfy your inquisitive nature?"

"Thank you," said Spike, "it does."

Then in answer to the corporal's shouted summons he picked up his possessions and carted them to the cot which had been allotted to him.

The mere fact that he had been tripped up didn't bother him at all. He should

worry! One hard knock more or less didn't make any difference. But at the time he was too hot and tired to enter into the spirit of the thing. He wanted to get his stuff straightened out in quick time and stretch out and sleep.



DEBAETS, however, was keenly disappointed. His little joke had fallen quite flat, and he resented the recruit's cool manner as a personal insult. He liked to see his victims grow angry and threatening. Then he could loom over them like a great, good-natured bear and tame them with mighty smacks on the back which sent them reeling across the room. That was the established program—and it hadn't worked.

His reputation was at stake, and for Spike's special benefit he uncorked all his most cherished tricks. The fun spread out over several days. The trestles supporting Spike's bed were yanked out from under him while he slept; his kit was tumbled off its shelf onto his head; he was soused with a bucket full of slops one evening when he was starting down-town in his No. 1 uniform, and he had to stay up half the night trying to clean it; the sleeves of his tunic were sewed up so that he was ten minutes late getting on parade and picked up ten days' arrest to teach him to be punctual; a pair of shoes a size too small was substituted for his own, and he had to limp along for thirty kilometers while Debaets cheered and jeered him on.

It was all very funny, and for a while Spike laughed too. But day by day Debaets' jokes became just a shade more dubious, for he was beginning to despise Spike wholeheartedly. The American was far too self-contained and quiet to suit Debaets, who liked lots of noise and blows and laughter and maudlin reconciliations at the canteen.

When his cronies, including old man Giessen, began to laugh at *him* instead of at Spike, he felt that something really startling was needed to restore his tottering reputation.

He started in bright and early one morning by spilling a mugful of scalding coffee down Spike's neck.

Spike woke up, sat up, and rolled off his cot.

"Haw-haw!" remarked Debaets, holding his sides. "See him steam! Haw-haw!"

There was no echo to his laughter, however, for the other Legonnaires were watching Spike's face, and when Debaets caught sight of it he stopped laughing too. Never in his life had he seen a more malignant, more evil expression on any man's countenance. Spike didn't appear to be angry or excited; he was cold and quiet as ever—except for his eyes, which glowed like coals.

"All right, Debaets," he said, speaking his few words of French very slowly. "You've had your laugh. Now—quit it. You understand me? Quit it. Enough. If you try any more fancy dodges you are going to get hurt."

Debaets puffed out his chest and made his shoulder muscles bulge. He wasn't afraid of this little squirt—looks never killed anybody.

Then he burst out laughing.

"Oh, Corporal," he bawled. "Corporal, here's this great big Yankee threatening to kill me. Oh, Corporal, help!"

He brought down the house. Even the corporal, who was rushing into his clothes, cracked a smile.

"C'est bon!" he snapped. "Get dressed and stop fooling. Rollcall is due in another three minutes."

"Don't forget," added Spike, pulling his tunic over his wet shirt. "You're warned."

But Debaets was not the type of man to heed such a mild warning. Spike didn't frighten him—not one single bit. In fact, Spike and his evil countenance and his warnings amused him considerably, and he spent the morning devising fresh and novel means of pestering his victim.

At the rifle range he managed to joggle Spike's elbow and spoiled his score; on the way back to barracks he trod all over Spike's heels, solemnly and heavily; and as a splendid climax, just as the company filed through the gateway, he kicked him in the seat of the pants—a mighty kick which raised Spike two feet in the air. When he came down to earth again the sergeant awarded him four days' extra drill to teach him "not to leap about like a frog."

And still Spike said nothing. The rest

of the morning went by swiftly in a rush of work, and when the midday *soupe* arrived Debaets scored again. After a wink at the other troopers, he lumbered clumsily against Spike just as the latter was about to sit down with a mess-tin in one hand and a bottle in the other. Tin and bottle went skidding across the floor, and Spike had to go without his wine ration.

"Now then, my boy, now then," barked Debaets in imitation of the sergeant's gruff manner. "Must be more careful, you know. This won't do."

"That's right," agreed Spike, "it won't do."

But he cleaned up the mess without a protest when the orderly corporal started to shout at him, and he dined quite quietly on stale bread and water. In the platoon's opinion he was licked. There was no fight in him—and the opinion prevailed until the men went back to the barrack-room for their two hours' lay-off during the heat of the day.

WHEN Debaets came in Spike was already hard at work oiling his rifle.

"Here we are! The busy little bee!" cried Debaets, walking up to Spike and slapping him between the shoulders. "We'll make a soldier out of——"

And that was as far as that speech went, for Spike's fist closed his mouth. For one dazed moment Debaets felt as if he had been kicked by a mule: his lips were cut, his teeth were all loose, and the cigarette he had been smoking had been squashed flat against his nostrils.

Spike had thrown his rifle aside and was standing about three paces away looking at him from under bushy brows. And he realized in a flash how uncanny and fiendish Spike looked with his black brows flaring up toward the temples.

The Legionaires were standing about in frozen attitudes, some standing, some sitting, all of them with their heads turned toward the two men in the middle of the room.

"You've been asking for it for a long while," Spike said in his clear, quiet voice, "and now, by heck, you're going to get it, you lousy scut."

Debaets let out a wild roar. He gritted his teeth, closed his eyes, and lashed out—a tremendous blow which should have connected with Spike's jaw and laid him out.

But, behold! His fist met nothing but the thinnest of thin air. He spun around like a top, lost his balance, and fell down on old man Giessen, who was standing close at hand to congratulate the victor.

"Zowie!" commented Spike. "That was a bambino, Debaets, I'll tell the world! Get up and show papa how to do it. C'mon," he added sharply, "don't lie there all day. Make it snappy!"

After a while Debaets and Giessen became sufficiently untangled for Debaets to rise up again, sputtering with rage and indignation. He wasn't afraid—not in the least afraid. He intended to thrash Spike within an inch of his life, and afterward, *Gotverdom,* he would not offer him a drink.

He walked straight up to Spike, shook a rigid forefinger at him and started to say, "Species of a dirty hound, you——"

"Shut up and fight," ordered Spike. "I'm through talking."

Something immensely hard collided with Debaets' jaw. He saw stars, strange moons and bright flashes of flame. But he was built along rugged lines and, though dazed by the blow, he was by no means out.

Again he roared, and waved his arms, and hurled his fists about, and never by the remotest chance did those mighty fists hit anything.

Spike was never where he should have been, but he was very busy nonetheless. In something under a minute he had completely spoiled Debaets' open countenance, so that it looked like something the cat might have brought home—something red, raw, and quivering.

THE Legionaires, forgetful of the gallons of Algerian wine Debaets had poured down their throats, were howling with delight. Their cheers brought other men crowding in at the door; a hundred enthusiasts witnessed the slaughter.

Debaets felt himself slipping. He roared,

he stamped, he lumbered about, colliding against the iron cots, against the table and benches; he barked his shins; he tried to grab Spike in his arms—and Spike smote him one appalling crack under the jaw.

Then he was sick and dizzy, and his knees began to wobble. He couldn't even see his antagonist, for his right eye was shut tight, and a gob of blood obscured his left one. At that all his courage drained out of him. Spike's fist crashed against his ribs, just over his heart. He could feel his ribs crack. He knew they were cracked. He couldn't breathe: they were digging into his lungs. He was being murdered!

Suddenly he was afraid, mortally afraid. He backed away faster and faster until he bumped into the convulsed spectators—who promptly shoved him back toward his executioner.

He gave one long hoot of sheer terror and collapsed at Spike's feet. So far as he was concerned the fight was over.

"How about it?" inquired Spike, sucking his bruised knuckles. "Had all you want?"

The rasp of his voice made Debaets wince.

"Enough!" he hiccoughed. "Oh, yes! O God, yes! Don't kick me!"

"Nobody's going to kick you, so far as I know," answered Spike. "And what's more, you ain't worth kicking. You're just a big, soft slob, and I guess now you'll quit pestering people for a while."

Debaets waited a moment longer to make quite sure he wasn't going to be kicked to death (if the rôles had been reversed *he* would have kicked); then ginerly he sat up and wiped the gore out of his one sound eye. Slowly he lumbered to his feet, and the onlookers waited expectantly, half hoping he would go on with the fight. But he was altogether through. He staggered feebly across to Spike and held out his hand.

"It is you who win," he said in English. "I admire greatly: the best man he win. Shake the hand of friendship, yes?"

Spike shook the hand of friendship, and the platoon laughed and cheered itself hoarse. Later that evening everybody adjourned to the canteen, and Debaets was so lavish both with his money and his unstinted praise of Spike that no one had the heart to remind him of his disgraceful collapse.

When the canteen closed Debaets and Spike meandered arm in arm across the pitch-black parade-ground, singing "Sweet Rosie O'Grady."

ALL through the oven-heat of August, the Legion was busy putting the finishing touches to its recruits. Drill, march, drill—and drill again. Spike worked and sweated as he had never worked before. The day was almost in sight when he would be ready to leave the depot. It was a hard, stark life, and he took to it as a duck takes to water. He fitted in. Off parade he remained what he had always been—quiet, easy-going, and moderately thirsty at all times, but especially so on payday.

Everything went smoothly. Even Debaets went out of his way to be pleasant. At times, it is true, he fell into brooding silences. His old boisterous manner had deserted him completely—knocked out of him, it seemed, by Spike's fists.

After that one splurge at the canteen, he changed his habits, much to the platoon's disgust, and spent his evenings down-town either alone or with his bootblack, old man Giessen.

Now Giessen was a veteran with close on twenty years' service behind him. He was rotten with malaria, among other things, and at times his mind would wander away down strange by-paths, which made him a dubious companion at best. If he wasn't mad he came perilously close to it at times, but he was harmless, and as he performed his duties like an automaton he was allowed to linger on at the depot while he waited for his pension.

For reasons best known to himself Debaets lavished all sorts of money on Giessen, filling him up night after night with the most powerful brews to be found at Sidi bel Abbes—and some of them are powerful enough to blow the top of the average man's head clean off. Debaets himself drank little, and many a time he brought Giessen back to barracks in an almost comatose state.

Before the end of August, Giessen's

hands were palsied and he was showing unmistakable signs of alcoholic poisoning. Nobody interfered, for in the Legion every man is his own master when off parade and has the right to dig his own grave as he sees fit and to hop into it whenever it suits his purpose—and Giessen was old enough to know what he was about. Nobody cared whether he died of D.Ts., sclerosis of the liver or sunstroke. There were, indeed, men who envied him.

Spike, however, entered a heated protest, when one night he awoke to find Giessen clawing at his bare shoulder. He thought he saw Debaets standing in the bluish shadows by the wall, but by the time he had ridded himself of Giessen—he kicked him in the stomach and sent him all the way across the room—the bulky figure which he thought was Debaets had vanished.

Giessen collapsed noisily on top of a sleeping man, and his fall was greeted by a storm of blasphemous oaths from a score of men who craved a few hours' undisturbed rest.

When Spike tackled him, Giessen had no explanation to offer other than that he had been drunk and had tried to crawl into the wrong cot. That was all Spike could get out of him.

As to Debaets, he laughed long and loud, quite in his old manner, when he heard the story—Giessen trying to strangle a man like Spike, and for no reason— Why, it was too funny for words.

Had he been awake at the time? Certainly not. He had been sound asleep.

"But look here, you're sorta responsible for that old coot," Spike pointed out. "He's getting pickled on your money, Debaets, and it strikes me you're more or less responsible, see? Just bear that in mind, if he starts wrastling with my neck another time."

"Me—responsible!" gurgled Debaets, smacking his thigh. "That is a good one, yes! Poor old Giessen, he would not hurt a fly!" Still laughing, he appealed to the other men in the room. "Spike thinks Giessen wants to strangle him! Can you see that happening? It's a funny one all right and no mistake."

And the laugh, that time, was at Spike's expense. Nevertheless, a doubt lingered in his mind.

IT WAS two days later, a Saturday and a payday, that Giessen lurched up to him as he was about to enter the canteen. Giessen, as usual, was a little more than half drunk. His eyes were bloodshot, and little bubbles of spittle frothed in the corners of his mouth as he breathed.

"Just one minute," he said, laying a shaking hand on Spike's shoulder. "Want to speak to you—quick."

"House on fire or something?" inquired Spike as Giessen drew him into the shadows out of earshot of the canteen doorway.

"House on fire," repeated Giessen, scratching his head and looking around in a dazed way. "No—now wait—what was it I wanted to say to you?"

He grumbled all to himself for some moments, groping about in his foggy brain for the thing he had to say.

"Look here," he went on at last, "you're all right, Spike—see what I mean? I like you—you're all right." He pawed at Spike's arm. "You're a good man, even if I do say so: a good man, and you want to be careful, see what I mean?" His voice sank to a hoarse whisper. "Watch out, otherwise some morning you may wake up with a bayonet sticking in your guts."

"Sure, I'll watch out," agreed Spike. "But, say, who's going to do the sticking?"

"That's just the trouble," mumbled Giessen. "You see—*I am.*"

"Ah, go chase yourself," jeered Spike, thoroughly reassured. "You're crazy as they make 'em."

Giessen waggled his head up and down several times, and steadied himself against Spike's shoulder when he swayed forward.

"That's just it," he admitted. "I know I'm not right. My mind goes—dark. Dark, you know: black and full of fire. And then that swine Debaets, he talks to me. Talks, talks, talks! He says I've got to kill you, see what I mean—see?" He was snivelling angrily. "*I* don't want to do it. You're a good fellow, and I like you. A good fighter, that's what you are—like me when I was younger. But Debaets, he's so sure about it: when I'm sober, like I am now, I can see he's all wrong. But in the dark, he'll

start talking, telling me things about you, goading me on, and I get so I want to do it, see. I *want* to do it!"

"Well, take it from me," retorted Spike, "you're not going to do it. Just you trot right back and tell Debaets he can do his own murdering himself. That's the way to fix him. Tell him you've got a pension coming along in another four months, and you don't intend to face a firing squad just to please him."

"That's true," admitted Giessen, "but he says if I don't do it you'll kill me."

"Bunk!" snorted Spike.

"But that's what he says, and sometimes he makes me believe him. He's so sure. And he says if I do it quiet— No!" he broke off. "You're quite right, Spike; it's too risky. I'll go tell him now."

"Sure, you tell him," agreed Spike.

"If anything goes wrong, though," insisted the drunk, "don't forget I've warned you: you be careful. Now I'll go and tell him."

He wandered away toward the dim row of buildings on the far side of the parade ground, and Spike, turning on his heel, went up the steps leading into the canteen.

AT FIRST he was inclined to dismiss the whole rigmarole as just so much drivel: the imaginings of a madman. Debaets wouldn't be fool enough to try a thing like that.

But by the time Spike had finished his liter of red wine, he began to wonder just how much truth might lie behind Giessen's words, and he decided to find out at once. If Debaets was up to any such tricks, the time to settle his hash was now.

He found Debaets and Giessen sitting at the table in the center of the barrack-room. The oil lamp hanging from the ceiling shed a pool of yellow light on the tops of their close-cropped heads. Between them, on the table, stood a bottle and two tin mugs.

For a second they sat staring at him, and then Debaets spoke in his most genial manner.

"*Tiens!* Here's our old friend Spike. The canteen isn't closed yet, is it?"

"No," admitted Spike, coming into the circle of light cast by the lamp. "It's not closed yet—but there's something I wanted to ask you. The sooner I find out the better for *you*. Get me? Giessen tells me you——"

"I told you nothing!" shouted Giessen, banging the table with his clenched fists. "Nothing at all. You're a liar."

"You're drunk. Shut up!" ordered Spike. "I'm dealing with Debaets now."

Debaets had risen to his feet. Abruptly, scenting the danger, he leaped out of reach.

"What did I tell you?" he shouted at Giessen. "He's going to kill you. Quick! Get him, quick!"

"You lousy swine—" began Spike, but he got no further, for Giessen had whipped his bayonet from its scabbard and was coming at him around the end of the table.

Spike dodged, ducked—caught up a blanket off a nearby cot and flung it at the darting blade in Giessen's hand. The madman roared, foaming at the mouth, while he tried to free his bayonet from the woolen folds. And during that split second Spike lashed out—one blow. It caught Giessen squarely on the point of the jaw and felled him. He went over backward, all of one piece. The base of his skull struck the end of an iron bedstead; his spine cracked. Before he touched the floor he was stone-dead.

For the space of a heart-beat Spike and Debaets stood gaping at the body with its head twisted over one shoulder, and at the dark pool which glistened and spread across the scrubbed floor-boards.

"Now, by God, you'll go to the wall!" Debaets said between his teeth, after that moment of stunned silence.

Spike wheeled around, livid with wrath.

"Don't be a fool," he snapped. "He came at me with his bayonet."

"Did he?" jeered Debaets. "Tell that to the court-martial! You've crowed and strutted around here long enough, you *salopard*, but now I'm rid of you. You thought you could beat me——"

"In that case," broke in Spike, "I guess I might as well send you along to hell ahead of me!"

He snatched up the bayonet lying close to Giessen's limp hand and rushed, but Debaets was already clattering down the flight of stone stairs, yelling for help as he ran.

And that was the end of Spike Wallis.

The court-martial which dealt with him some days later sent him to the penal battalion for a period of three years. In all probability it would have exonerated him, for he pleaded self-defence, had it not been for Debaets' lying evidence. He swore Spike had started the fight, had killed Giessen and then had tried to murder him, Debaets. Moreover, Spike had been caught with a bayonet in his hand.

Sergeant Crangu—with five hundred francs in his pocket—swore Spike was a "dangerous individual with a violent temper," and Spike was left without a leg to stand on.

When he tried to explain the relations existing between Debaets and Giessen, he was promptly silenced. All that sort of thing, he was told, was quite irrelevant.

In the end the only thing that saved Spike from the firing squad was the fact that he had struck Giessen with his fist and had not used a weapon.

The presiding officer, in passing sentence, assured Spike that he was being dealt with very leniently indeed, and Spike was packed off to hew coal for four years in the mines at Kanadza, on the edge of the desert, where the temperature in the galleries soars to 130 degrees, and convicts die thick and fast to keep the state railroad in coal.

BUT Spike did not die.

For four years he labored and suffered very terribly indeed in the hot darkness of the mines. Day by day in that man-made hell he was broken a little more thoroughly and a grayness crept into his soul.

It may have been due to any one of a hundred causes: heat, fever, exhaustion, or the bestial brutality of the Senegalese guards—but whatever the cause, before his time was up and he went gack to duty his mind snapped.

He knew in a dim, groping way that his name was Wallis, but more than that he could not remember. Everything else had been smothered in the black horror of the mines.

After his release he would sit for hours, chin on fist, staring emptily before him with a puzzled frown between his eyes, while he tried to recall some one thing—some one vitally important thing which, he knew, would lift the curse that weighed down upon him.

On parade he obeyed orders with the cringing docility of a beaten dog. The sight of the stripes on a non-com's sleeve made him wince.

Off duty, too, he was just as docile and craven. Any man who felt so inclined could take his money, his wine or his food. There was no fight left in him. He didn't care what was done or said to him. For a time the Legionaires of his company made a clown of him, but it was poor sport, and they soon tired of goading this gray hulk of a man. They turned away from him with a shrug of contempt. What was the use of trying to extract any fun from such a creature? A cringing half-wit. Somebody one day called him "the drowned rat," and the name stuck, for it fitted him like a glove.

He answered to that name as readily as to any other. It didn't matter what they called him. Nothing mattered except that one thing which lay at the back of his clouded mind and would not come out.

Nothing mattered, neither heat, nor thirst, nor hardship. There came a time when he left the depot and went south into the desert. But where he might be going or why he neither knew nor cared. He marched mechanically, altogether unaware of his surroundings, spurred on by the one reality in his life: the harsh voice of his platoon sergeant.

March! The desert slid away beneath his hob-nailed boots, until one day at dawn he came out upon a great gray plain covered with stones and clumps of blue-green alfalfa grass, stretching away as far as the eye could see. And in the heart of that immensity, at the foot of a low hill of reddish earth, sprawled the oasis of el Khelil, the lair of Abu ben Djirha.

For a score of years this chieftain had mocked at the French, and harried the troops sent out to crush him. Time and again he had slipped through their fingers, looting and plundering from Tiout to Erfound, all along the borderland between

South Morocco and the desert.

But this time he was trapped; this time there was to be no escape. First had come a screen of mounted troops, Spahis and Chasseurs d'Afrique, and behind them, spread out like the fingers of a hand, five slow-moving columns of infantry had trudged down into the desert. When they reached the Marouad Hills, Abu ben Djirha said, "There they will stop, for they have no water," but they did not stop. They came on, lugging great tanks behind them, and they came over the Marouad Range, moving ever a little closer to el Khelil.

And when they came to the last barrier, the sun-blasted hills of Sherar, Abu ben Djirha said, "There certainly they must stop, for there is not a well in the whole land." And again they came on, the clumsy, heavily-laden French troops, and they drove back the people of el Khelil who came to halt them.

At last those five outstretched fingers closed in and became a fist of steel. Overnight they converged upon the oasis, and Abu ben Djirha was cornered.

COLONEL PALISSY, who had conducted the operation, had a right to be pleased with himself. There had not been a single hitch in the plan of operations which he had sketched out weeks before in the quiet of his office at Bechar. The great Abu ben Djirha had been run to earth, and there was but one more thing to be done, and that was to smoke him out. Without a doubt, he was going to fight. Bottled up in there with him there were three thousand or more of his followers, a horde of outlaws, whole tribes which had never known defeat, untamed people come from the ends of the desert to follow the magic banners of Abu ben Djirha.

Now Colonel Palissy's force numbered not quite two thousand. He had a battalion of Moroccan Tirailleurs, two companies of Legionaires, and a mixed squadron of cavalry. With this numerically inferior force he had outwitted and outmaneuvered the Arabs, but he had yet to defeat them. So far he had scored all the points, but the next few hours, as he knew, were bound to be critical. His troops were jaded, but he could not afford to delay the attack: the shortage of water was becoming acute, and he was over two hundred kilometers from his base. If he was held up for so much as one day, if anything went wrong, the campaign which had opened so brilliantly might very well end in disaster.

Moreover, his information as to the lay of the land within the oasis was scanty. The only spy who had come out of el Khelil had lost both his eyes and could not give a particularly coherent account of anything but the torment he had endured. The city, he said, was backed up against the flank of the hill, and was surrounded by a deep belt of date palm trees and walled gardens. There was but one road through the oasis, running roughly north and south, which led up to the gates of the city. Beyond that he knew nothing save that his eyes had been burned out with a hot iron.

Seen in the silvery gray light of early dawn the stronghold of Abu ben Djirha did not look as if it would be a very hard nut to crack. The thing to do was to go straight for it and hammer the Arabs until they gave way, which was bound to happen speedily. In the colonel's experience an Arab was only dangerous when he attacked; on the defensive he usually went to pieces in very short order.

It was all planned with mathematical precision: at 6:30 a.m. the cavalry was to make a demonstration on the south side of the oasis along the road leading up to the city. As soon as they were engaged the Moroccan Tirailleurs were to move forward past the hill and drive straight through from the north. The Legionaires were to act as tactical reserves during the opening stages of the battle, until the Tirailleurs reached the city; then they were to move up in support and make themselves generally useful rounding up stragglers.

At 6:30, on the dot, the cavalry staged its sham attack. It worked very nicely indeed. As the horsemen wheeled into line they were greeted by a quick burst of rifle-fire, which swelled to a prolonged

roar as they charged. All in a minute the southern flank of the oasis was swathed in dust and smoke.

Then the Tirailleurs got under way, moving swiftly down upon the opposite flank. Palissy watched them through his glasses. So far everything was going perfectly. A few stray shots greeted the advancing troops. Not too many, though. He could see the flash of the explosions coming from the blue shadows at the base of the trees. The leading company had less than five hundred meters to go to reach the first trees. They weren't losing any men to speak of: an odd one here and there. Four hundred meters to go.

ALL at once the colonel's glance was drawn to the crest of the low hill, standing out stark and hard against the hard blue dawn sky. It was alive with men. Through his glasses he could see them swarming over the ridge. Steel glinted in the sunlight. Little spurts of fire played along the hilltop, and a bluish haze floated upward. Seconds later the sound of the reports rolled against his ears.

A hail of bullets beat against the right flank of the leading company. It staggered on bravely enough for a few paces, losing men at every step; then the whole length of the oasis awoke with a roar, and that luckless No. 1 Company went to pieces.

Mute and white, the colonel watched the grim tragedy unfold and rush to its swift climax. The survivors of No. 1 Company went rolling back upon No. 2. Both were swept by the sleet of lead which raked them front and flank. The ground ahead of them was carpeted with their own dead and wounded. Their French officers and sergeants were being mowed down.

The ranks which a moment before had been steady began to waver. The advance came to a lurching halt. Some of the Tirailleurs stood firm, returning the enemy's fire; others went running back in disorder.

One of the units in the rear swung out of line and started up the slope. The colonel thought it was No. 6, but the fog of dust which swirled over the plain made identification almost impossible. The situation grew more confused each minute.

Through rents in the drifting dust-haze, Palissy caught an occasional glimpse of the assault. The red fezes of the Tirailleurs stood out vivid as blood-drops against the dull reddish-brown of the hillside. The counter-attack was petering out. The men were going forward with lagging footsteps; many were going down. The others were spreading out, scattering like so many sheep. All at once they broke and went racing back down the slope.

And all over the hill-crest poured a torrent of Arabs. Their long-drawn yell carried all the way back to the wagon-lines and brought an amazed oath to the colonel's lips. They butchered the disorganized Tirailleurs and flowed back under cover again as soon as they came under fire.

"But good God!" exclaimed Palissy. "Good God! Can't have this sort of thing going on! Can't put up with this sort of thing! We'll have to pull 'em out and give 'em a chance to reform. *Bon sang,* the whole thing will have to be done over again."

And the one word "water" flashed through his mind. Water, water, water!

Nothing was going right. Nothing. He had never expected anything like this. Bad tidings rushed in upon him: the cavalry had pushed their charge too far and had lost heavily. They had gained a foothold on the south side of the oasis and were holding on. But they needed reinforcements; needed them urgently.

"Can't spare a man," snapped Palissy, sharply interrupting the young officer who had brought in the message. "Not a single man. I'm depending on you to keep the enemy busy while we straighten out this tangle."

The young Spahi officer clicked his heels together and galloped back to get himself killed.

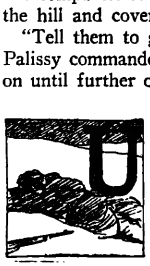
Now the Tirailleurs were emerging from the dust. Stragglers at first, then several units all jumbled together. They were reforming not half a mile away. Palissy could see several officers with drawn swords going about rounding up their men with violent gestures. It did not appear to be an easy task.

The colonel was overcome by a feeling of nausea, and his mouth went as dry as dust. Spent bullets wailed thinly past his head: shrill little voices which seemed to speak of defeat and dishonor and death. He was two hundred miles from his base. Between lay an empty desert——

Again he looked over at the Tirailleurs. They were being whipped into some semblance of order. If only they would get to grips with the enemy without being too badly mauled, they were sure to fight like fiends.

Palissy swept all his doubts aside and rapped out a string of orders: the Tirailleurs were to go forward again in fifteen minutes. Same objectives. Meanwhile, the two companies of the Legion were to carry the hill and cover the main advance.

"Tell them to get under way at once," Palissy commanded, "and tell 'em to hold on until further orders."



UNTIL the voice of his platoon sergeant brought him leaping to his feet, Spike had been only dimly conscious of his surroundings. He had been lying flat on his stomach, with his forehead pillowed on his arms. He was very tired for he had marched all night, and there was a dull spot of pain on his right heel which had been rubbed raw by the worn lining of his boot. Also, he was thirsty; so thirsty, indeed, that his lips and his tongue were swollen and cracked. Some trooper—he could not even remember which one; nor did it matter much—had stolen his water-bottle and had cuffed him when he had tried to cling onto it. The Drowned Rat! What did it matter if he did die of thirst? The whole platoon was agreed that he would not be missed—weak, crazy fool that he was.

But Spike had not been bothering about this thirst of his, while he sprawled in the dust and dozed with his head on his arms. There was a name on the tip of his tongue, a name which rolled about in his brain always just out of reach, always tantalizingly close. And that morning in the gray dawn, as the second company of the Legion trudged by to take up its position, he had caught a glimpse of a face which fitted in somewhere with that elusive name. For an infinitesimal fraction of time the fog which clouded his mind had grown thin. He had been overcome by a strange and terrible passion which made his lips draw back off his teeth in a snarl of hate.

The face had passed out of sight, and the fog closed in again, but the memory of that flash of red wrath did not vanish. He dreamed of the face—dreamed that he was battering it with his fists—and muttered incoherently to himself until his neighbor clouted him over the head and ordered him to shut up.

Then the sergeant was shouting, "Up, No. 4 Platoon!" and he was on his feet in a second. He obeyed orders with the unerring precision of an automaton.

"Bayonette au canon! Fix bayonets!"

Both companies drilled as one man. Steel rippled in the sunlight; metal clanged against metal. Steady!

"Take open order. By your right—extend!"

The ranks opened out with a quick scuffling of heavy boots, and again grew steady. Eyes front!

For an interminable period, so it seemed to Spike, the day stood still. A hush had settled over the plain, and only a dull mutter came from the south side of the oasis where the cavalry were fighting hand to hand against the rebels. In the distance the red hillock trembled in a gaseous heat haze. Nothing moved.

Spike forgot his surroundings. Again he tried to recall that name. It was right on the tip end of his tongue. A name—a queer foreign name— The name of the man up there ahead with the other company.

All at once the silence was shattered. A drum rolled, rolled again. Then strident and clear, ten bugles gave tongue, singing, most brassily singing, of honor and courage and death.

"Debaets!" yelled Spike. "Debaets! I've got it!"

"Silence!" thundered his platoon sergeant. "Name of God, you spittle skin, you'll do twenty days for talking on parade."

And his neighbors cursed him beneath

their breath for disgracing the platoon.

But Spike didn't even hear the sergeant. A flood of light had burst in upon his mind. The fog was almost gone. He knew; at last he knew! He was whole and sane again.

Debaets! The drums thundered it, and the bugles shouted it. Debaets, Debaets, Debaets!

And now he was moving forward, clicking over loose stones, gripping his rifle so hard that his fingers were numb.

Debaets! Up ahead there, somewhere. Debaets!

SO, THE Legion went into action, headed by its *clique;* by the hammering, rolling drums, and the high-pitched, yelping bugles. Three hundred men going to their deaths on the naked slope of the low red hill, marching across the shadowless plain, officers six paces front and center, *serrefiles* three paces rear.

They swung past Colonel Palissy; they left the Tirailleurs behind; then went out into the open among the dead. The hill was a hard red crescent against the sky—a smooth, gentle slope crowned with weather-worn rocks.

Abruptly the drums were silenced.

"Charge!" yelled the bugles. "Charge!"

And the sergeants took up the shout.

"At 'em! Get at 'em! *Allez, la Legion, en avant!*"

A lick of white flame burst from behind the rocks; a puff of smoke eddied up. The crest was afire from end to end, and a stream of bullets poured down upon the Legionaires.

The front ranks went down like ripe wheat before a scythe; sections and platoons were crumbling away. The survivors went on.

Spike found himself racing headlong up the slope side by side with his platoon sergeant. Then the non-com's skull cracked like an egg, and he fell over sideways, spattering Spike with blood and brains as he dropped. A corporal took command. He, too, died before he had covered another ten yards.

En avant! One last effort, one final heave, and Spike was in among the rocks. The hot breath of a rifle burned his cheek. He drove his bayonet home to the hilt in the throat of an Arab who rose before him. A twist of the wrists, a jerk, and out came the slender blade.

The hilltop was alive with brown, bearded men in tattered gray *djellabas.* They came at the Legionaires, yelling their hate out of wide-open mouths. And the reddened bayonets bit into their flesh; the gun-butts crashed down upon their heads.

During the next few minutes Spike went berserk. He it was who led his platoon—what was left of it—over the top of the ridge and cleaved a lane through the swirling mob which tried to bar his way. A bullet grooved his thigh, but he felt no pain at all. An Arab slashed him from ear to chin, laying the jawbone bare, and he sent that Arab to Kingdom Come with the point of a bayonet in his brain.

Blood-smeared and terrible, he went about his butcher's business with tight-lipped deliberation which made the men of his platoon gape at him in wonderment. The Drowned Rat had come to life! Drowned Rat, indeed! After the junior corporal had been bowled over, after the last *soldat de première classe* had gone down with a knife in his bowels, Spike led the way, and the Legionaires were content to follow.

The ridge was conquered, lost, conquered again. In among the rocks the fight ebbed and flowed, waned and flared up again in a billowing fog of dust and smoke. The two companies of the Legion were reduced to a handful of men: fifty perhaps out of three hundred, battling against gigantic odds. The Arabs hurled themselves against the bayonets with the courage of despair. If the ridge went, then the road into the heart of el Khelil lay open.

Rush after rush was shattered by the Legionaires, and they themselves were hemmed in, pounded and torn to pieces. The last officer had gone long since; the last sergeant was riddled with bullets, and still that cluster of sweating, cursing men clung to the ground they had gained—for the order was to hold on at all costs: to hold on to the last man.

Down below, almost unmolested, the

Moroccan Tirailleurs were closing in upon the oasis. The fight, so far, had not lasted thirty minutes.

For one brief moment the Arab resistance ceased altogether. The Legionaires were left in possession of the ridge. There came a lull while, sweat-blinded and panting, they stood among the heaped-up dead too dazed to move or think.

IT WAS then that Spike Wallis and Corporal Debaets came face to face for the first time in four years. And the corporal was green with fear. He wanted to get out of that charnel-house alive and intact. In a little while he was going to be free to go back to his beloved Antwerp, and he found life very precious and very, very precarious.

For years he had pottered about at the depot, doing clerical work in the battalion office, and until that day at el Khelil he had never heard the thin song of the bullets, nor seen a dead man, nor been exposed to danger of any kind. Only the worst kind of bad luck had torn him away from his comfortable office and hurled him into the midst of this noisy horror: he had omitted to salute an officer—quite by accident, of course—and forthwith he had been returned to active duty.

And now he was in a panic. The Arabs, he felt sure, would renew their onslaught before many seconds had gone by—he could see them massing beneath the trees—and he simply could not face it. He had gathered together the troopers who had been standing near him and started a hasty retreat.

When he stumbled against Spike, who was heading the other way, he tried to brush him aside.

"We can't hold them," he croaked. "They're going to attack again. It's suicide. Get back, I tell you! Get back!"

But Spike made no move to obey the corporal's order. Indeed, he called the corporal a "lousy coward," much to the amazement of the Legionaires.

"I'll have you court-martialed!" shouted Debaets. "When I give you an order you'll obey at once, do you hear?"

"The corporal's right," grunted a trooper. "We can't do any good here."

"So you'll have me court-martialed again, will you?" laughed Spike. "Look at me, Debaets; look hard! Remember the last time you had me sent to jail?"

Debaets looked and his eyes bulged out of his head like marbles; his mouth hung open.

"Wallis!" he gabbled. "Wallis!"

"Wallis," snarled Spike. "That's me, sure!" He whirled upon the nearby Legionaires and shouted, "That swine sent me to the mines because I whipped him with my bare fists. *I* was there four years because of him." And quite irrelevantly, he added, "First man tries to retreat gets a bullet of mine in his head. Form up! Get into line, you *salopards!* You're taking your orders from me, and not from this so-called corporal. Form up!"

The rebels were coming again, pouring out from beneath the trees, swarming over the rocks, shouting exultantly as they swept up the slope to the slaughter of those few men.

The Legionaires wavered, glancing dubiously from Spike to the corporal and back again. Panic is contagious, and Debaets oozed panic at every pore. If he said the word they would follow him, rather than listen to Spike.

Debaets glanced over his shoulder, saw how close on his heels that roaring tide had come, and completely lost his head.

"I'll teach you to disobey orders!" he bellowed. "I'll show you——"

It was over in a flash. He lunged forward, driving his bayonet at Spike's throat. Spike parried, lunged, and drove his own weapon home into Debaets' heart.

The four years in the mines at Kanadza were wiped out and gone forever.

"Form up!" he shouted. "What the hell are you waiting for?"

"You can't—" began a trooper.

"I can!" Spike retorted. "One more word out of you and out goes your brain. Do what you're told—smarter than that!"

And there was a joyous ring to his voice which put fresh heart into the Legionaires.

They met that Arab rush with a compact volley. They emptied their magazines into the surging mass, swept it with a gale of bullets, smashed it and blew it

to pieces; and when the onslaught waned Spike lifted his fistful of men forward—there was a bare score left standing—and led them in a crazy, cheering charge which snuffed out the last flicker of resistance.

Shortly before noon the tricolor flag floated above the oasis of el Khelil, and Abu ben Djirha was no more.

RAWN up in the marketplace before the smoking ruins of the robber city, the victorious troops paraded before their victorious colonel.

Palissy thanked the Spahis and the Chasseurs d'Afrique. Then he thanked the Moroccan Tirailleurs, who had captured Abu ben Djirha. And then he turned to the small band of Legionaires, led by a short, spare soldier of the second class who appeared to be a mess of blood and dust from head to foot.

They had suffered very heavily indeed, and he thanked them too in well chosen words, although he used few superlatives. for after all they had merely carried out a flanking movement, whereas the Tirailleurs and the cavalry had done the lion's share of the work. It was a pity Legionaires were so reckless with their lives.

"Are you the senior soldier?" inquired Palissy, looking down at Spike.

"I don't know, *mon Colonel*," Spike admitted modestly, "but I'm sort of in charge."

"You don't *know!*" exclaimed the colonel. "Upon my soul! How irregular. Just let me have a look at your *livret*, my man!"

Without a word Spike handed over his military booklet.

"Good God!" cried the colonel. "Good God! Four years in prison and he dares to take command of two companies of the Legion. I've never heard of such a thing. Back to the ranks with you. Now then, who's the senior soldier? Quick now, speak up!"

And though there were at least five men who outranked Spike, not one of them moved. They looked so stupid and so stubborn that the colonel decided hastily to let them have their own way. He was too wise a man to interfere with the purely domestic and temporary affairs of a score of filthy Legionaires. The jail-bird was left in charge.

"Since your comrades seem to trust you," he smiled, "I propose to do likewise, for the present."

"Company," bawled Spike in a voice like thunder, "pre—sent arms!"

So it came about that a jail-bird marched the remnants of two companies of the Legion back to the base; and if a little while later it reached the ears of certain non-commissioned officers that Spike was known no longer as "the Drowned Rat," but as "the Corporal Killer," they refrained from asking any questions, for there are some things which even the best of non-coms do not try to find out.

NEWSOM AGAIN! *NEWSOM AGAIN!*

THE PARIAHS

A Foreign Legion Novelette

by J. D. NEWSOM

will be one of the features of the next issue. The Foreign Legion in action in North Africa—and under the leadership of an officer who is all man—a man after the Legion's own heart!

Salty Bill's Range Talk

THE other day a feller made the remark tuh me that good manners was the same the world over. Well, when it comes down tuh the underlyin' spirit of decency that's at the bottom of all good manners, I reckon mebbe he's right. But jest the same, I couldn't help thinkin' that when it come tuh the outward manifestations, as yuh might say, of perliteness, it seems tuh me they vary right smart, dependin' on the locality a feller's in. Take the West, f'rinstance, an' the cow range in p'tikler. There's lots uv little things that a feller has tuh know about out there if he aims tuh git on with other people, an' not rub their fur the wrong way an' get 'em so het up by his foolishness—unintended, of course—that some quick-triggered gent'll crack down on him.

If a feller is ridin' acrost a wild bit of range country, an' sees somebody else ridin' towards him, it's good manners tuh either wait fer t'other chap, er ride tuh meet him, unless you got a good reason fer not wantin' tuh meet up with him. If yuh turn off'n the trail, er hurry along, so's he cain't pass the time uh day, he's likely tuh think yuh got a guilty conscience, er been throwin' a wide loop, er been up tuh some kind o' devilment. When two people meet in a wild country, they got a right tuh look each other over, and see what their mutual intentions are towards each other.

Now that doesn't mean that a feller has a right tuh ask questions, er be nosey—not by a long shot! It's jest the other way round. You an' the stranger tell each other just what an' how much yuh care to—but yuh principally use yuhr eyes tuh find out what sorta hombres yuh are dealin' with. A feller in a long, black coat told me onct he was a missionary travelin' tuh a new field uh righteousness; but I couldn't see no prayer books an I *could* see leg-thongs o' a couple uh gun-holsters 'round his legs. But it warn't up tuh me tuh call his attention tuh this apparent deescrepancy, so we parted friendly like. A man in the West is entitled tuh be treated as what he claims tuh be—less'n his claims interfere with someone else's rights.

Again, if a feller was comin' to somebody's camp, he wouldn't just rush up any old way. He'd be careful to come from the direction where he could be easiest seen, an' he'd holler when he was about a pistol-shot off. It don't pay to sneak up on folks. Your intentions might be mistook. Same way, if yuh overtook somebody on the trail yuh always exhibit yer breedin' manners by givin' a loud hulloo o' some sort before ridin' up close behind a feller's back—before yuh got within gunshot.

When a feller rides up tuh a ranch-house, he expects tuh be invited tuh rest an' eat. "Light down, stranger, rest yore pants an' chaw a bean!" the boss'll say. An yuh do—but if yuh got any sense yuh won't climb down till the invite has been issued. 'Tain't perlite, an' sometimes it's a presumption that ain't healthy. But there's another side, too. If a hombre's hard up fer grub, an' comes tuh a ranch where nobody's home, he c'n go right in an help hisself to what's needed tuh carry him tuh where he's goin'. All that's needed is tuh write yore name on a piece of paper, tell who yuh are an' where yuh're goin', what yuh took an' why, and leave it in a prominent place. Pay or not, as yuh can, and pass the favor along tuh someone else when they're needy.

But kin yuh imagin' a hungry man goin' intuh one o' them cafes in Chicago er New Yauk, takin' grub, and leavin' a writin' fer it? Yessir, manners varies, an' what's good manners on the range mought be called somepin worse'n bad manners by them city sheriffs an' what not. But it works both ways. Main thing, if a feller aims tuh be decent, he can easy pick up the little ways of the place he's in, an keep from makin' a fool of hisself an' annoyin' other folks. If he ain't—well, good manners won't save him in the end.

LEGIONAIRES OR RANGERS

IF YOU wanted action—real, slam-bang ripsnorting action—where would you be most likely to find it? That's an easy one. In the Foreign Legion or the Texas Rangers. The next issue of FRONTIER STORIES will offer a fine opportunity for comparison. In J. E. Grinstead's long novelette, "Clint Terry Rides the Border," which opens the issue, we have Texas Ranger action hard and fast. Single-handed Clint faces the Don Carlos gang and almost certain death. It is a tale that will present this popular character in one of his most thrilling exploits.

For the Foreign Legion J. D. Newsom introduces Second Lieutenant Grellon—an up-from-the-ranker, a two-fisted officer whom the Legion can understand and appreciate. Single-handed he tackles a mutinous company, then dives pellmell into a bloody native slaughter. "The Pariahs" is just such a Newsom novelette as we always expect from this thrilling writer.

Eugene Cunningham has a bit to say for the Texas Rangers also. In "The Frame-Up" Ware takes a hand in what looks like a shut case. And pretty soon the aspect of things starts to change. A fourth novelette will be that of E. S. Pladwell, "Imps of the Desert." An excellent and unusual story this, in which the irresponsible old desert-rats lock horns with a powerful gambling house boss and all his paid killers.

Among the short story contributors will be Tex Rawlins, with another Western yarn; Joseph T. Kescel, with a mining camp tale; Evan Anglesea, with a tale of Haskins and the Burmese jungles; Bassett Morgan, with an unusual Northern story —and several others.

MURDER AT THREE ORPHANS

EUGENE CUNNINGHAM your letters and Readers' Favorite Coupons nominate as one of FRONTIER'S most popular authors. Before this we have called attention to the genuine flavor of his stories, to which much of this popularity is undoubtedly due. His brief note, which accompanied "Murder at Three Orphans," in this issue, again indicates the authentic source and reliability of his material.

"The other night a geologist friend of mine was out here and as two students of the Old West we got to yarning of bad men and lost mines—the latter a subject in which he is naturally interested," he writes.

"I mentioned a certain famous mine—or alleged mine—from which an old-timer was supposed to have taken a great deal of money, all of which he immediately blew into his whisky-glass. And from the geologist came another slant to this yarn—virtually the fundamentals of 'Murder at Three Orphans.' My friend gathered in the details piecemeal over several years and a good many trips to that section, and

neither of us cares to get into print with the real name or locale of the original happening.

"But, a long time ago you remarked in The Trading Post that you believed the air of authenticity of yarns in FRONTIER STORIES came from their real-life origin. Certainly, this holds true for most of my stuff; I take real incidents and shape and point them and cement them with a thin film of fiction. In the writing, I can often see the real characters moving; I merely rename them. And more than usually, even, is this the case with Ware and old Pegleg."

GRINSTEAD IN THE MOVIES

TO THE millions of enthusiasts who have read and reveled in his thrilling magazine stories, J. E. Grinstead is now adding new millions through the medium of the silver screen.

Among the first of his stories to appear in motion pictures is "The Scourge of the Little C," which appeared as a complete novel in FRONTIER STORIES. William Fox produced the picture and is presenting it under the title "Tumbling Waters."

When the film was displayed recently in his home town, Kerrville, Texas, his fellow townsmen staged a Grinstead week and insisted that their popular local sage and novelist appear in person at the performance.

THE MAIL POUCH

SO MANY and so excellent are the letters which have been flowing in lately that we might well devote a whole issue of the Trading Post to them. Keep it up; this is just as it should be—for it is only by your expressions of opinion that we are able to improve the magazine along the lines you prefer.

First of all is a letter from a Trading Post visitor furnishing information requested by another of our circle:

Editor, FRONTIER STORIES,
Dear Sir:-

Mr. E. H. Lyles, Box 324, Ruston, La., wishes to know the author of "Thirty-One Years on the Plains and in the Mountains." This was Captain William F. Drannan, Chief of Scouts, as pilot to emigrants and Government trains, across the plains of the wild West of fifty years ago. Sold by Rhodes & McClure Publishing Co., 106 South Jefferson Street, Chicago, Illinois.

W. A. Caldwell,
Edgewood, Calif.

FRONTIER STORIES arrived in Santa Claus' pack for this reader—and evidently was more than welcome:

Editor, FRONTIER STORIES,
Dear Sir:-

I am enclosing a card with a verse of sentiment that I received for my Christmas present from my son, who knows that I read FRONTIER STORIES every month and that it is the only story magazine I enjoy. Thought perhaps you may be able to find a place in your good magazine for this:

TO DAD

No Christmas list I ever had
Would be complete without my Dad;
But looking round for quite a while
For something that would fit my "pile,"
And bring a lot of Christmass cheer
Not only now, but through the year
I thought of all the stories keen
That come in a certain magazine,
That snappy mirror of Western glories
Those captivating "Frontier Stories."
(Yours for 1928)

W. S. Arnold,
3249 Victor St.,
Kansas City, Mo.

Next comes word from another Shelley Raines booster—who will no doubt be pleased to hear that the ex-Texas Ranger will soon make a reappearance in our pages in a complete novel—probably in the issue after next.

Editor, FRONTIER STORIES,
Dear Sir:-

You will no doubt notice that I have on all my Readers' Favorite Coupons, marked two 1's and 2's and so on. All the stories are so very good that it takes about ten minutes for me to figure out the ones I liked best in it. In the future I am going to try to mark only one with each number but it will be a hard job.

What happened to Shelley Raines? Let's have some more stories about him. I like the stories about Ware just as well as the Shelley Raines ones, but it would be grand to have one of each in the same magazine.

Enclosed find four Readers' Favorite Coupons. This entitles me to an original pen and ink sketch.

Walter Miller,
706 First Avenue,
Altoona, Pennsylvania.

Here is an excellent letter from a native son of Montana who wants to read more about some of its roaring old frontier towns. Perhaps some Trading Post visitors can suggest books which will give him the sort of information he is after:

READERS' FAVORITE COUPON

"Readers' Favorite" Editor, FRONTIER STORIES,
Garden City, N. Y.

The stories in this number I like best are those marked below (indicate your favorites by numerals 1 to 5—1 for your first choice, 2 for the second, etc.)

___Squad One	___Broken Glass Talks
___Words of Fire	___Dan's Temper
___Murder at Three Orphans	___Drowned Rat
___Dad Streeter, Oculist	___Salty Bill's Range Talk
___The Vanishing Voyageur	

I did not like_____

Name_____ Address_____

Editor, FRONTIER STORIES,
Dear Sir:-

Diversity of stories appearing in every issue of FRONTIER STORIES makes it my favorite short story magazine. Bar none!

With your staff of writers, such as J. E. Grinstead, Newsom, and L. Patrick Greene, contributing stories who would expect better fiction for your host of readers. May I add also, FRONTIER STORIES does not need long drawn continued stories for "come on sales." I know, for if I am later than the 25th in securing my copy it's a case of being out of luck.

I am a Montanan, native son, but plead ignorance to its past historical days. I wonder if you have a historian on your staff who happens to know anything about the town of Bannock, Virginia City or Alder Gulch during the flaming period of the gold days.

The article by Kenneth Richards concerning Smiling Williams in the last issue is very interesting. More of 'em.

Here's to your success,

Wallace S. Phelps,
6413 Glenwood Ave.,
Chicago, Illinois.

This Newsom fan wants to read more about "Barbour" and "Dagliev." We have passed this letter along to Mr. Newsom, and perhaps the seed will bear fruit. Answering his other questions, we might mention that Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., publishers of FRONTIER STORIES, will shortly publish a complete novel about the Foreign Legion by Mr. Newsom. Also William Heinemann, Ltd. of London, England, have brought out a book of Newsom's short stories, all of which have appeared in this magazine:

Editor, FRONTIER STORIES,
Dear Sir:-

I have read and enjoyed FRONTIER STORIES for some time, and particularly the Foreign Legion tales of J. D. Newsom.

Ask him what has become of "Barbour" and "Dagliev" and if he's ever going to bring them back from Officers' School?

Where can I get these stories in book form?

Best wishes for the continued success of this magazine.

Horace V. Cawthon,
Y. M. C. A.
Louisville, Kentucky.

Always we are glad to hear of your preferences—both as to authors and as to individual stories. Here are a few opinions taken at random:

Editor, FRONTIER STORIES,
Dear Sir:-

I have been a reader of FRONTIER STORIES for a long time but before this time I have never read the Trading Post letters nor filled in the Readers' Favorite Coupons. I like FRONTIER STORIES because of the highly exciting and interesting stories, especially because all the stories in FRONTIER STORIES are complete.

Every story is worth the price of the whole magazine. I picked "The Last Man" by Bertrand L. Shurtleff, as the best in this issue, along with "Down on the Picketwire" by Allan Vaughan Elston, because the former was the most humorous and the latter the most exciting. "The Honor of the Legion" by J. D. Newsom, was close on the heels of these two and easily took second. The others are all good. I liked them all.

Odell O. Smith, Jr.
Sandwich, Mass.

Editor, FRONTIER STORIES,
Dear Sir:-

I have been a constant reader of FRONTIER STORIES for three years and like your stories, especially Newsom, Cunningham, and Grinstead. The sea stories are also very good. I'd like to see the Major of diamond-smuggling fame appear in your magazine.

Yours for better stories

H. E. Rheingans,
1098-4th St.,
Milwaukee, Wis.

THEY CERTAINLY DO KNOW THEIR CIGARETTES, THIS YOUNGER CROWD!

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SOMETHING ABOUT FATIMA—ITS GREATER DELICACY, ITS MORE SKILLFUL BLENDING OF FLAVORS — HAS MADE IT, AS IN OTHER DAYS, A CONSPICUOUS FAVORITE WITH THE YOUNGER SET.

FATIMA

OUTSTANDING FAVORITE AMONG HIGHER-PRICED CIGARETTES!

You can, but why should you make HOME-MADE CANDY?

We make it THIS way

FUDGE CENTER: 1½ cups pure cane sugar; ½ teaspoon creamery butter; 1 cup rich, full cream milk; 1 cup corn syrup; white of one egg.

CARAMEL LAYER: 4 teaspoons creamery butter; 1¼ cups corn syrup; 3 cups rich, full cream milk; ¼ teaspoon salt.

PEANUT LAYER: 3 cups prime No. 1 Spanish whole nuts, roasted in oil (hulls removed).

CHOCOLATE COATING: Melt one pound pure milk chocolate.

Here's OhHenry! all ready to eat, and made that home-made way. Why wrestle with pots & pans? 'Cause you know home-made candy's best? So do we! That's why we stick to this good old home-made way in producing OhHenry! for you. LOOK!—you'd make it of the very things we use!

So when you want home-made candy just save time & trouble — say **OhHenry!**

Look for the new Gingham wrapper

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"I got the idea from Florenz Ziegfeld"

Said Gladys Glad to Flo Kennedy behind the scenes at The Ziegfeld Theatre between acts of The Follies.

Florenz Ziegfeld, famous theatrical producer, writes:

"As the producer of 'The Ziegfeld Follies' I know full well how important it is for my stars to have clear voices at all times. Several years ago, when I first began to smoke Lucky Strikes, I noticed that my voice remained unirritated after a most strenuous time directing rehearsals. I passed this information on to my stars and now we are all agreed: Lucky Strike is a delightful smoke and most assuredly protects the voice, eliminating any coughing, which often interrupts a perfect performance."

Florenz Ziegfeld

"It's toasted"

No Throat Irritation—No Cough.

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